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by MARIAN O'HEARN

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March Issue Will Be Published January 25th

Volume Thirty-Three | February, 1946 | Number One

Exciting Love Novel of the Old West

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She was a pulsing, vibrant creature of love—half Spanish, half American . . . and all wolf! But her gay husband hunt met only cool indifference from Texas Neil Clark.

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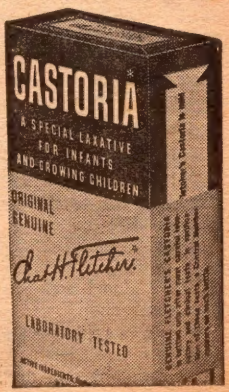

Chas. H. Fletcher **CASTORIA**

(The original and genuine)

BLACKMAILED BRIDE

DINAH eased quietly into her room and softly closed the door —and then stood there with her hands pressed against the door, her blue eyes wide and her lovely back stiff. It took her a couple of minutes to change her surprise to anger. Sitting on the edge of her bed was a visitor. Dinah said sharply:

"You know what happens to thieves?"

Her visitor was not upset by that accusation. She was Lizette Marin, the pretty half-breed girl. Though Lizette was only fifteen she was as mature as her firmly rounded body.

"For stealing hearts?" Lizette asked.

Dinah was furious. She tossed her beautiful golden head. "Get out of here," she ordered. Go on!"

But Lizette only remained there on the bed smiling. "No—not yet will I leave. . . . I will make a trade." Her black eyes steadied. "That is a nice gown you are wearing—and a nice fox robe. I will make a trade."

Dinah was puzzled by this turn in the conversation. Her mouth was stiff. "I will give them to you. And if you don't take them and leave immediately—I'll call the Colonel."

Lizette, after all, was only an *engagee* at the fort, and that was hardly better than being a slave. For stealing, the penalty was twenty lashes across the bare back with a rawhide whip. That would make quite a mess of the girl's creamy flesh. But Lizette was fearless tonight—not even the threatened wrath of Dinah's father, the austere Colonel Clark, awed her. Lizette said:

"I don't want them. I want *him!*"

"Him?"

"The man you met in the blacksmith shop —in that nice robe." Lizette jumped to her feet then, her black eyes blazing. "Kemp Sherwood is the man I want," she almost shouted. "And I'll have him. Or everybody in the fort will hear how the daughter of the Colonel met Kemp tonight in the blacksmith shop."

This was a Lizette that Dinah had never seen before. Lizette had always before been laughing, flirting, taking nothing seriously but men and her own striking beauty. Now, she was a fighter, and the softness of her had disappeared. But Dinah could fight too.

"Go ahead," Dinah said. "Poke your head out the window and tell the world." Already the fort was waking up and people were on the move below. "Shout your story to everybody."

Lizette sized her up with smoky eyes. "I will," she said. She wheeled away to the window, lifted the latch and pushed open the sash. Dinah could see the doeskin shirt tighten across Lizette's back as the half-breed girl took a deep breath. And in that instant Dinah was panicked. She rushed across the room and dragged Lizette back.

Lizette put up no resistance. There was complete triumph in her face.

Dinah asked: "What do you want me to do?"

Lizette let Dinah suffer for long minutes, then answered very slowly: "Put Kemp away. Tell him that Pat Mills is your man."

"No," Dinah said; adding hastily: "Pat Mills is going to try to kill Kemp Sherwood."

"Because of the gold?" Lizette asked.

"So you knew?" Dinah was surprised.

Lizette nodded.

Dinah saw something behind Lizette's mask that was a sudden revelation. It was something indescribable in her expression —it was a lust for the precious metal that transcended everything else. Dinah burst out suddenly:

"Then you don't love Kemp Sherwood?"

"No," said Lizette. "I love someone else. But I intend to have Kemp's gold."

The girls were stalemated there for a long time, each wondering how far the other would go, each wondering where the breaking point would come. . . .

The complete, wholly exciting story of Dinah and Lizette will be told by Art Lawson in his feature novel—"Little Miss Dynamite"—in the next issue. There's also novelettes and short by Thelma Knoles, Marian O'Hearn, Bill Severn and others. March RANGELAND ROMANCES—published January 25th.

The Editor.

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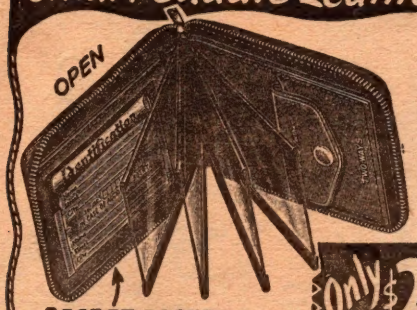

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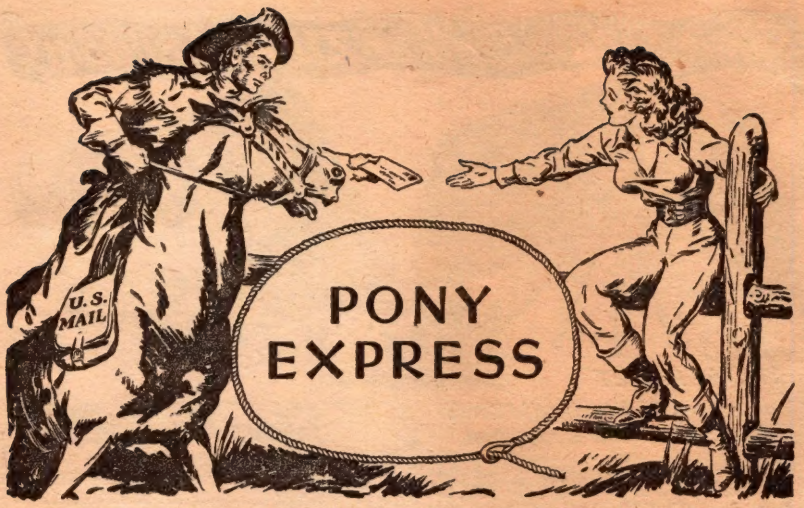

Every lonely RANGELAND ROMANCES reader can get acquainted with our lively pen pals all over the world.

♥ ♥ ♥

Bush-Workin' Marian

Dear Editor:

I tried once before to get a small space in your Pony Express, but never succeeded. I am a regular subscriber to RANGELAND ROMANCES and I love the book. I am an eighteen-year-old girl, five feet three and a half inches tall, blonde hair, and dark-brown eyes. My occupation is bush work. By bush work I mean I cut and peel posts and logs and I love it. My favorite pastimes are canoeing, swimming, dancing and playing the guitar. I would like very much to hear from young lumberjacks, miners, cowboys or anyone else that will write to a lonesome girl. I have practically every evening to answer letters I hope to receive. So please try and fill my mail box to overflowing.

MARIAN HANDLEY
Tobermory, Ontario
Canada

Lonely Southern Belle

Dear Editor:

I'm a Southern Belle from good old Alabam' and I'm hopin' to get just scads of letters from boys and girls everywhere. I am 15 years old, 5 ft. 1½ inches tall and weigh 106 lbs. I have blue eyes and red hair, yes and I have some friendly freckles.

I like to swim, dance and ride horseback when I get the chance. I collect fine and pretty stationery and postmarks. So come, you boys and girls and write a lonely Southern Belle.

DOROTHY H. BARNETT
Toxley, Alabama (Box 76)

Blue Peepers

Dear Editor:

How's about printing my request for a chance at a collection of pen pals? I greatly enjoy RANGELAND ROMANCES and think the Pony Express is super!

I am a young girl with very black hair, blue "peepers" and fair complexion. I stand 5' 4" and weigh 105 pounds. My family and friends call me 'Nita.'

I love horseback riding, reading, and letter writing I collect souvenirs and snapshots and I go all out for photography. I can do almost any kind of housework, sewing and cooking (if I have to).

I will exchange snapshots with anyone. Pals all over the world, you are challenged 'o make my postman's sack bulge.

Hurry!

JUANITA TEDFORD
317 Madison Avenue
Clarksdale, Mississippi

Welcome, Friend

Dear Editor:

Please put my name in your pen pal department for a letter shower from everyone any age. I'm a widow 42, and have a son overseas whom I miss very much. So please write to me, men and women, boys and girls.

MARY C. KNOWLES
3106 Edgewood Drive
Evansville 15, Indiana

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SENORITA WOLF!

Exciting Love Novel of the Old West

By Marian O'Hearn

CHAPTER ONE

Careless Kisses

"YOU'RE sure this is the place?" The hack driver jerked a disparaging thumb at the sagging gates which bore a splotched sign reading: *Eat as many grapes as you wish—half a dollar. Wine one dollar.*

Sina's head lifted and her dark eyes reduced the driver to the level of the churned white dust. "Of course it is. The Rancho Maria! Drive in, please."

He snapped the reins and wheeled his horse into the lane formed by trellises which supported the great vines. And Sina hungrily drew in great breaths of air. She was back. She was home.

"Wait," she cried, at the end of the lane from which she could see the untidy yard and crumpling old house. "Stop here."

"Here?" His glance was even more critical.

She laughed, softly. "How much do I owe you?"

"That'll be five dollars."

"Five dollars! For driving from Marysville?"

"That's my price. I told you what it would be."

"How could you tell me when you'd never been here before and didn't know how

♥ ♥ ♥

She was a pulsing, vibrant creature of love—half Spanish, half American . . . and all wolf! But her sultry-eyed promises and gay, rich-husband hunt met only cool indifference from Texas Neil Clark.

Sina figured that no man could fail to respond to her. . . .

far it was? All right—here it is, but you're a robber, a thief."

She made the business of getting out of the carriage a sweeping exit. Standing in the white dust of the driveway, she stared toward the vineyard, toward the shady arbor which was so carefully hidden from view.

Lifting her long, be-ruffled skirt as high as her black-silk-clad knees, she began to run. Her high heels made her stumble but did not halt her race for the spot which had always been a haven.

At the entrance, she heard hoofs roll across the yard behind her. That would be Nuncio, the only rider on the ranch. In fact, he was half of the Maria outfit. The other half consisted of old Tim Ellison who acted as caretaker and wine-seller.

The slap of hoofs halted. She went on into the arbor, pretending not to hear Nuncio hurry in after her.

"*Señorita—Señorita* Thomasina! You came back—like this."

She turned with pretended surprise and, tilting back her head, laughed at him. "Of course I came back, like this. How else? Nuncio, bring some wine and we'll drink a toast as we used to do. Remember?"

After her absence she was seeing him with greater clarity, was abruptly acknowledging his attractiveness. Nuncio was tall and lithely made. His gaudy shirt and metal-trimmed chaps made the most of his grace and coloring. His eyes were as dark as his hair and held the reflection of fierce sunlight. Even sunlight could sometimes be dangerous, but Sina had long ago learned what to do about Nuncio.

"Didn't you hear me?" she demanded. "Bring wine."

He stared at her with a hunger so great it was close to hatred.

She laughed, letting the sound begin low in her throat. She knew how she must look to him and the realization was pleasant, safe excitement exploding in her blood. Her blonde Spanish beauty was unusual as a flawless sapphire. Her hair, which she wore in braids bound about her head, was metal-toned. Against very white skin, her night-dark eyes held the languor of old Spain, her nose and short upper lip were aristocratically assured. And her mouth glowed with the deep crimson which belongs only with black hair.

Her body, in its tight-bodiced, full-skirted traveling dress of snuff brown was entirely American. The finely balanced torso and long, straight legs were her only inheritance from a New England mother.

Sina was completely aware of all these things because it was necessary for her to know of every value she possessed.

"Please," she said, and sat down at one of the benches drawn up to the wooden table. "I'm never happy with shoes on. Take them off for me."

"How did you get here alone?" he demanded. "Does the *señora*, your aunt, know you came?"

"The *señora*, my aunt, knows nothing and never will. My shoes, Nuncio, darling."

He knelt, stiffly, and as he bent to untie the shoes, the back of his neck colored angrily. "There," he said, taking them off and placing them under the bench. "Does the *señorita* wish anything more? For a moment I forgot myself—"

"Hush." She touched his cheek with light fingers. "Bring the wine and we'll drink. I've been dreaming of having wine here, under the vines! Hurry."

"It's here," he said and grinned, all the angry hurt gone from his face. He started away at a near run.

Taking off her hat which was trimmed with scarlet flowers, Sina dropped it onto the bench. Impatiently, she pulled the pins out of her hair, opened the braids and let it fall over her shoulders. "Now," she said aloud, "I'm coming alive. I've been dying steadily, ever since I left. Only a little at a time, but still dying."

She pulled up her skirts again and stripping off the black silk stockings, pressed her feet gratefully into the cool, moist earth.

Nuncio returned with two baskets, one containing a wine bottle and glasses, the other cakes. "Old Tim didn't see me. Although we don't have a customer more than once a week these days, he takes his job seriously—thinks he's the only one to handle the wine."

She waited for him to pour it, and with her eyes on his face, said: "You've missed me, I hope? Has anyone else around here missed me?"

He paused and handed her the filled glass. "Yes, there was much talk of your going. Let's drink to your happiness."

She lifted the glass to lips almost as rich as the wine. "There's nothing that can taste like the wines of the Rancho Maria," she murmured. "I even remember when I'm asleep."

Nuncio bent toward her. "Maybe it's because of me?" he asked softly. "Maybe you came back because of me, too. Sina, remember the last night—the night before you left?"

Her smile was slow. "No, we don't talk of that now. We'll think just of the moment in our hands." She drank again and, her mouth wet with wine, let her smile grow.

With a sound which in a woman would have been a broken sob, he took her into his arms. His mouth found hers and she relaxed against him, but only for a moment. Then she ended the kiss. "That makes everything perfect. The sun, the earth under my bare feet, the wine—and you."

His arms dropped. "Sina, Sina! It's always like this. Don't you ever think of me as the man you love? Or is it always as part of a second or a—sensation?"

"I don't know," she said. "But you told me there was 'much talk' since I've been gone. What is it? What are they saying?"

Nuncio's face lost color and his eyes gave up some of their fire. "Mostly about what'll happen to San Francisco now that you're there. They find this range pleasanter with you away. At least, the women do and they call you *La loba*—Señorita Wolf."

Points of light flared in Sina's eyes and she did not smile, but her voice was a near caress as she said: "Give me some more wine—"

THE words broke off; for without hearing even the tiniest sound, she knew someone was standing in entrance to the arbor, watching them. With the wine glass at her lips, she turned her head and met the gaze of the man looking in at them. Or rather, she felt her glance caught up into his gray eyes.

"Afternoon, Ma'am," he said, and came into the arbor.

Nuncio got to his feet. And in the second that the two men faced each other they were symbols of different worlds. The stranger, in dusty blue jeans, flannel shirt and black neckerchief, was somber in comparison to the Spaniard. He was taller and more powerfully made but lacked the other's litheness although he possessed the ease which comes from hard-won assurance. In spite of his weathered skin, his brown hair and gray eyes made him seem strikingly fair.

"Can we help you, *Señor?*" Nuncio's words were polite but his tone was curt.

"I came in for a glass of wine. The sign out in front says you sell it."

"Of course," Sina said. "Bring a fresh bottle, Nuncio."

He stared at her before he turned sharply and silently out of the arbor.

"Sit down." She indicated a chair, and slid herself onto the table. "You look as if you'd come quite a distance."

"Yes." The gray eyes ran over her. Quiet eyes which had lost their youth although his mouth still held it. His brown hair was boyishly sheened with gold. "I've been riding over this district for days, ever since I left San Francisco more than a week ago. I heard your voices and thought it'd be cooler here than in the house. I'm hunting for a ranch to buy. One that's not too big." His voice held a faint, drawling roll.

"You haven't been in California long?"

"No, Ma'am."

Sina knew that the bleakness of his eyes held her away, prevented his seeing her!

The cowboy went on: "I'm from Texas. My name's Neil Clark."

She stirred and as she leaned toward him, her lips parted. He *must* see her and be aware of her! What kind of man could fail to respond to her as she was now with her beauty made intimate by her loose hair and bare white feet? She asked softly:

"You intend to live here—why?"

Nuncio came in with the wine and his glance stabbed first at Clark and then at her.

"Thank you," Sina murmured. "Since I'm here there's no reason for you to stay. Old Tim'll be looking for you."

"I'm staying—" his words broke off as her narrow dark brows lifted. "All right. I'll tell Tim you've come."

"Why did you do that to him?" Clark asked as soon as Nuncio had left.

"Send him away? He works for this ranch—for me—and shouldn't be idling in the grape arbor."

The gray, quiet glance moved over her

face and she knew what he was thinking. When he had come to the arbor entrance he had seen her in the young rider's arms.

She smiled as lazily as she had at Nuncio, wondering if he were as stern and scrupulous as he looked. Pouring more wine into his glass, she refilled her own. The ripening grapes made a pagan frame for her eyes and lips, for the shower of her hair. "He's still a—hired hand," she murmured. "At times, at moments, that isn't important—but only during those moments."

She let his gray glance take hers again and lifted the glass to touch the red wine with her red lips in a gesture as sensuous as a caress.

Before she knew he had moved, his hands closed on her shoulders and pulled her close. Holding her like that, without taking her into his arms, he kissed her wine-wet mouth.

It was she who broke away. The glass fell, spilling the wine over her dress. Her hands clenched into fists as they struck out at him. When he let her go, the stillness of his eyes broke and blazed with fleeting light.

"You—misunderstood me." She was breathless and her heart was plunging against her body. His kiss had wiped out the sun and shade, the taste of the wine; had denied everything which was part of her. *As if he'd carried me into an empty, ruined land.*

"No, Ma'am," he said. "I didn't misunderstand you."

She stared at him and knew that he was laughing at her. She said, her words rapid and harsh: "This South of yours must be a—dreadful place."

"I don't come from the south. I'm from Texas." He got up and dropped a gold coin on the table. "For the wine, Ma'am—thank you."

Sina did not speak because she could not.

The Texan turned back. "Would you be willing to sell this place? It's gone to seed but it could be a good, productive spread."

"You mean—will I sell the Rancho Maria?" Her words lifted in thin amazement. *"Sell it?"*

"Why not? It looks as if it'd been abandoned. How many head of cattle do you run?"

"That has nothing to do with it. We don't bother much about stock any more."

And then challenge returned to her eyes and made them languorous. He was so coolly upright, so sure of himself. Grim as a shaft of New England granite and he did not belong in any place where people laughed in the sun and drank or loved by starlight.

"You see," she explained, "this is my *background*. You know, the old rancho which has been in the family *so* long—understood to have been inherited from a Spanish grandee and so on. There's the picture. The beautiful, aristocratic Spanish girl who is capturing San Francisco with her charm after tearing herself away from a great ranch where she lives like a princess."

"I see," he said tonelessly. "What does the masquerade bring you?" His gray eyes were pulling at her.

She laughed. "It will bring me a rich husband, a very rich husband. My aunt pawned everything we could find to pay for our stay in San Francisco. If I don't get a rich man we'll lose even the Rancho Maria. Of course, though, I *will.*"

"Of course. But what happens if he sees this place as it is—a forsaken spread where wine and grapes are sold to travelers? Suppose the rich prospect should accidentally see it before marriage?"

"It won't make any difference. Even if we aren't married when he finds out, it's still here—a fact. That will make him realize I've let the family estate deteriorate because I'm a helpless woman in great need of protection."

He nodded. "It'll work, too. The best of luck, Senorita—I hope you find a millionaire."

"Do you believe—"

But he was gone.

Her smile disappeared. As she listened to the diminishing sound of his pony's hoofs, she stared down at the little pools of wine spilled on the table.

For a second, his kiss had shaken her world. Yet, during the second, she had felt strangely and splendidly free. Only now was she realizing that.

Getting up from the table, she went to the arbor entrance and whistled. The whistle was a long-held, single note. It was the signal which she had always used to summon Nuncio.

CHAPTER TWO

Beautiful Schemer

DRAW up right here, Nuncio." Sina said as the aged buckboard neared the main doors of the stage station. Nuncio stopped with a jerk. Silently, not looking at her, he got out and came around to help her down.

Sina smiled. "Do I look all right? This dress is probably a wreck. Wasn't it insane to leave without any baggage? That's really why I'm going back so soon."

"Is it?" His eyes held the reflection of fierce sunlight. "I wish I knew the real reason—" He broke off and said, almost jeeringly: "Of course, the ranch isn't very comfortable. Not what you're used to in San Francisco."

"Good-by, Nuncio," she said, her lips soft over the words. "I'll see you soon."

Inside the station, she went up to the passenger agent who was talking to a man surrounded by expensive luggage. "Mr. Graves," her voice was appealingly uncertain, "do you think I can get a seat on the eight o'clock stage? If I can't—"

"Miss Carbeza!" He almost leaped toward her. "Of course. There's plenty of room."

"Thank you." Her glance flicked past him to the other man who was dressed in tweeds which could have been made only in England. Even his shoes and hat looked like Bond Street and they lent importance to his somewhat bulky body. He was close to thirty but there was no hint of heaviness about his good looking face.

Their glances touched, as she had intended.

Then the passenger agent hastened to make the introduction. "Miss Carbeza, this is Mr. Canning. Gordon Canning," he added, and his tone underlined the name.

Sina put out her hand and her smile was rich. *Gordon Canning.* Everyone knew of him for he owned mines, lumber mills and land. One of the richest men in California —and still young.

Her dark eyes showed only the suggestion of challenge and the color in her cheeks was delicate. His hand was strong

"Easy does it" when you use
The low-priced blade well groomed men choose!
That's Thin Gillette, four for a dime—
It cuts down shaving cost and time!
Made of easy-flexing steel hard enough to cut glass
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10¢
Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

in spite of its smoothness. There was shrewd strength in his face. He had blue eyes, which were measuring, and an unreadable mouth.

His hand tightened, the smoothness of his flesh clinging to the softness of hers. "Now I'm glad my stage broke down," he said. "And if you're going all the way to San Francisco this is my lucky day."

"Did you have an accident?"

"Not exactly. An axle broke just outside Marysville, so I had to change—for which I'm grateful."

Sina's eyes took on more awareness, more hint of promise. "I'm glad too. But I'd better see about my ticket—"

The passenger agent said: "Just get into the stage, ma'am. It's waiting. Looks as if you two are the only passengers. You get in too, Sir. I'll have the baggage put on."

Canning's glance questioned Sina and he took her arm— Smooth flesh touching smooth flesh.

Sina thought: *He's as cared for, as physically pampered as any woman!*

The stage was empty and he chose their seats deliberately, without consulting her. "I didn't know there were girls like you on the range," he said. "How did it happen?"

"I came up from San Francisco and just stayed overnight. I wanted a look at the ranch. I need to see it once in awhile."

His shrewd eyes were seeking the reflection of her words in her eyes. And she went on casually, telling him about the Rancho Maria, which had been in the Carbeza family for so long. . . . The records were misty, but it had undoubtedly been a Spanish grant, originally.

"I hate to leave," her voice held wistfulness. "And if it weren't that my aunt can't be dragged away from San Francisco—"

Her words stopped as a man in dusty clothes with a gun strapped against his thigh, stepped into the coach.

It was Neil Clark. He nodded: "Good morning, Ma'am."

Warmth cut into her cheeks and she said, too rapidly: "Good morning. It's a nice day for a trip."

"Yes, Ma'am," he murmured and took a seat across the aisle.

"This—" she began the introduction but he was already immersed in a newspaper and did not hear her.

SHE turned back to Canning and saw matter-of-fact appraisal in his glance. Had her disturbance been apparent to him? . . . A man like this would be knowing and not too easily captivated.

The thought was a challenge which struck reckless fire into her eyes and touched her skin with a new, almost luminous glow. All of her vitality concentrated on her objective.

"You were telling me about your family ranch," he reminded her.

"There's not much more to say." She was realizing that Neil Clark could not help overhearing her words. And she did not want to remember Clark now. "How long were you at Lake Tahoe?"

"A week. That place is unbelievable and I often go back to be sure I haven't imagined the whole thing. Of course, you've been there?"

"No."

"Then you'll have to go—with me. We'll make up a party in San Francisco and arrange for the steamer in advance. I'm always surprised at the sight of a steamer plying across a lake at the top of the mountains."

"Well, if my aunt can fit it into her program. She wouldn't let me go alone, of course. . . . Oh! I mustn't forget to send her a telegram at the next stop."

"I'll send it."

The stage swayed and shook. The driver cracked his whip and the five horse team lunged forward.

"Hope they'll take it slowly," Canning said. "This is all downhill, or down-mountain, and some of these drivers are reckless."

The whip cracked again and they hurtled around the first curve. Sina's glance strayed to Neil Clark, but he was still hidden behind the newspaper. Was he remembering, in amusement, what she had said about getting a rich husband?

"I was afraid of this." Canning's tone was grim. "That driver's still using the whip and this grade's dangerous. I wonder if the fool knows he'd only have to swing a few inches too wide to send us all over the edge."

Sina leaned back against her seat. The stage really was traveling at terrific speed, and the whip cracked steadily. But the swaying, crazy speed gave her the sensation of flight. She felt as if, free and unafraid, she was driving through space. It was excitement which whipped her blood into recklessness. The driver was singing at the top of his lungs. She, too, wanted to let a song of wild exultance pour from her throat. She clasped her hands together, forcing herself to remain still.

Neil Clark put down his newspaper. His eyes were still quiet, but there was amusement on his mouth, as if he sensed her primitive excitement. If she were sitting beside him instead of Gordon Canning, she probably would sing with the sheer, animal joy of speed. Maybe he would join her.

Canning said: "There must be a way to stop that driver. Maybe he'd hear if I shouted from the front window."

"I doubt it. The stage and the horses are making too much noise."

"But something has to be done. I didn't make this trip to be killed or maimed." He got out of his seat.

Neil Clark said: "It won't do any good, even if he hears you. Stage drivers consider they're in the same position as sea captains once a trip starts. But we'll probably get there alive."

"Just the same, I intend to stop this."

Clark shrugged. "Maybe you can—at the next stop. If you pay him enough he might make the rest of it at a walk. But it'll have to be handsome payment."

Canning colored and his eyes were blue stones as he stared at Neil Clark. "That'd be bribery. Do you think I'd bribe a working man?"

Clark grinned but before he could speak, Sina said:

"Mr. Canning, this is—Neil Clark."

"Howdy." The Texan nodded and returned to his newspaper.

Sina's gaze was suddenly angry enough to burn a hole through the printed pages. *He knew him,* she told herself. *Now, he's trying to make Canning seem smug and petty.*

Gordon Canning asked Sina in concern, "You're not frightened? This is terrible for you. Some girls would've fainted long ago."

"I—won't let myself," she said, her lips a little unsteady. "There's nothing to be done about it. I've got to pretend everything'll be all right."

He put his hand over hers. "Close your eyes. Maybe then you won't be so conscious of the speed." His voice lowered until it was a murmur and he added: "I'm here to look after you."

She nodded and her fingers returned the pressure of his, clinging with soft confidence. She closed her eyes and felt the smoothness of Canning's hand against the silkenness of her own. Perhaps by the time she reached San Francisco, the course of her life would be settled.

CHAPTER THREE

Headin' for Heartbreak

IN San Francisco, the stage-line passenger agent opened the coach door. As Gordon Canning helped her out, a voice so metallic with anger that it could belong only to her aunt, struck against her: "Sina! So, at last—"

She turned, swiftly, to prevent a scene which Canning must not witness. The torrent of words was already rolling over her. "—and I was in a state of collapse not knowing where you were—then came your wire—a young girl traveling without protection—"

Gordon Canning took Sina's arm and drew her closer as if to ward off her aunt's anger. "Madame, Mrs. Carbeza, your niece was perfectly safe. I saw to that."

"*You* did? And who are you?"

"Aunt Margarita," Sina lifted her voice. "This is Mr. Gordon Canning—of course, you've heard of him."

The woman's words stopped before her mouth could close. She stared, lips and eyes gaping, for a full second, before she thrust out both hands. "You are too good, too kind, *Señor* Canning. I'm not Mrs. but Miss Carbeza, the little one's aunt, although my feeling is exactly that of a mother. Indeed, I'm the only mother she has, and—"

Sina put her arm around the woman's ample shoulders with warning pressure. "Yes, dearest," she said in tones Margarita had never before heard from her, "but Mr. Canning has to take care of his luggage. After that he'll drive us home."

"Our carriage is here, but no matter. I'll send it back. You go with the kind *señor* and I'll wait here."

The baggage had already been checked by Canning's driver. And, as they returned to Margarita, his carriage, monogrammed and gleaming, drawn by matched grays, drew up at the entrance.

He helped the older woman in first and, as she waited, Sina's glance lifted as abruptly as if in answer to a command. Neil Clark was standing near the empty coach, watching her and grinning faintly.

"Good-by, Ma'am—and good luck." He pulled off his broad-brimmed hat and the light brought out the boyish fairness of his hair.

But she knew that he wasn't seeing her. At least, not seeing her as a disturbing woman. Yesterday, though, his composure had broken and he had caught her into his arms. . . .

"I don't say good-by," she told him, and offered her hand. "Just *Hasta la vista.*"

Even in the sunshine her eyes were night-dark and her mouth a glowing, crimson promise. She tilted her head and knew that the line of her throat was creamily perfect, as beckoning as her lips.

"Thanks." He released her hand.

"My aunt's still thanking Gordon Canning," she murmured. "And she's doing a thorough job of it, but no one's thanked you."

"Why should they? For what?"

"Well—" she squeezed her lashes together until they were a veil over her eyes —"perhaps for being on the stage. It wouldn't have been proper for a girl to be alone with a strange man on such a trip. So," she let her lashes lift until her eyes were wide, "the presence of another person made everything all right."

"I'm glad I was of service."

"Which means," she continued, "that my aunt will have to meet you again when she can give you more attention. We're having a party tonight. That's one of the reasons I ran away. Aunt Margarita's parties are always dull. But now I'm glad I came back."

"I can understand that, too."

"Then you'll come?" She opened her bag and took out a card. "The address is written on the back."

He grinned. "I saw you writing it while we were on the stage, but I thought it was for Canning. You've managed things fine—but inviting me may be a mistake."

"Sina?" Margarita's tones were heavy with maternal concern. Canning was standing beside the carriage waiting for her.

"I'll expect you," Sina murmured and went swiftly toward the carriage.

Gordon Canning sat between her and Margarita during the drive to the rented house on Sacramento Street, but refused an invitation to "stop long enough for a cup of tea."

"Tonight's not far away," he told Sina. "And even if it seems a long time to me, I'll see you then."

"And I'll be waiting for you." Her eyes and lips made the words a promise but she looked almost demure as she followed her aunt.

In the house, Margarita turned on her. "Go to your room and start dressing at once. No one can look their best without proper preparations. See that your gown's ready. Have the maid brush your hair. Lie down for awhile. I have a million things to do. We'll talk later."

Sina went obediently upstairs. The maid helped her bathe in the cumbersome portable tub.

When Margarita came in Sina was dressed in a gown of white moire which was so heavy that, without supporting hoops, it stood out below her waist like a huge, spreading flower.

Her aunt gasped her outrage.

"Don't you like it?" Sina asked gently. And moving with a swaying mannekin stride, she slowly circled the room.

Margarita accused: "You changed that bodice after it was made! It was not so low at the final fitting. Are you crazy? We didn't come here to have you become a—scandal. I thought you'd behave like a well-bred young girl, but you want to take off clothes instead of put them on. And that isn't the worst! You're flirting like a wanton. No matter what a man's age or position you make him believe you're interested."

The girl's eyes opened reproachfully. "But we came here for that—for me to find a rich husband. I thought I was supposed to interest men."

"You won't get a rich husband by attracting every unattached male in the city.

The men you should be interesting will decide to look for someone they can trust."

Sina returned to the dressing table. "I suppose you want me to receive with you."

"Of course. But we won't go downstairs for at least half an hour. No one will be here much before ten."

"I'm going down now."

"Sina—"

But she closed the door behind her and ran for the stairs. On the lower floor, the library, dining room and conservatory were empty, but in the living room the orchestra was settling into place on a flower-banked platform.

CROSSING the library, she opened French doors, which led onto a long balcony, and stepped into a night rare to San Francisco. The air was almost tropically warm and so free of fog that the moon was triumphantly pouring down its light. And the town lay below her, skirted by the great bay which had become a silver lake.

She leaned her elbows on the railing, her eyes greedily taking in every detail of the scene. But it dimmed out and was lost to her, for she was suddenly back in the grape arbor of the Santa Maria with Neil Clark kissing her wine-wet mouth.

"I'm remembering that because he's the only man I've met who finds me—unimportant." She told herself. "His kiss didn't mean anything and I know it."

The doors, which she had closed behind her, opened, but she did not turn or move for she was sure it was Neil Clark. In spite of his pretended indifference he had come early in order to be alone with her!

"Thomasina. . . ." The word was whispered, but it struck at her.

She whirled, her face whitening with angry surprise to see Nuncio Moreno. "How did you get here?" she demanded.

"I took the stage that left two hours after yours—because I can't be away from you any longer, Sina. My love is past that now. I have to be with you."

His hands lifted and touched her arms. She backed away from him.

Something happened to his eyes and to the youngness which had been in his face.

Sina said: "You know you shouldn't have come here."

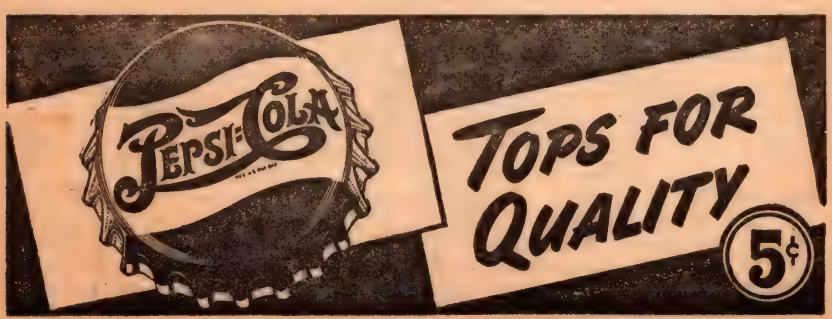
"I love you. You'd love me, too, except that I'm even poorer than you are. That's why you ran away."

"Oh, Nuncio." Her voice was heavy with both annoyance and amusement. He seemed like an overgrown school boy and his gaudy range clothes were as out of place as a masquerade costume at the opera. In fact, he was still wearing a gun in an open holster. "Go down to the kitchen and the cook'll give you some dinner. If there's no stage back tonight, she'll find a place for you to sleep. Now, I've got to go in. I hear the guests arriving." Her skirt brushed against him as she moved to the door.

He caught her arm. "Let me look at you," he said harshly. "Let me look into your eyes. Do you mean this—that you're sending me down to the kitchen as if you were a great lady and I one of your servants? Is it really like that—after I've held you in my arms?"

"Nuncio, let go of me!"

His fingers dug deeper into the softness of her flesh. And his face was turning into



that of a savage stranger. "It *is* true," he said. "You kissed me because you wanted to at the moment. But another man would have done just as well. Now you want me out of your sight because I don't fit in here."

"Let me go—at once."

"No—" His voice had changed into strange softness—"I'll keep you with me. Like this, Thomasina mia!" His free hand slid under his leather vest and slid out a knife. "I'll make sure no one can ever buy you away from me!"

"Nuncio." Her lips shaped the word, but her throat would not function. The moonlight danced along the knife blade and in a second, in a single, downward stroke, it would reach her. She tried to break free—to scream for help.

A tall man stepped through the half-open doors behind Nuncio's back. With flashing speed one hand clamped on Nuncio's wrist and the other jerked back his head. It was then, his face contorted with the effort of holding the desperately struggling boy, that Sina recognized Neil Clark.

Nuncio coughed brokenly and moaned as the knife dropped to the stone floor.

Clark lifted Nuncio's gun from the open holster and released him. "It's all right now, son. You got mixed up—but nothing's worth that."

Nuncio stared blankly, panting.

Neil Clark put an arm around his shoulders. "Let's get out of here."

Silently, as if will-less, Nuncio followed him. As they went out Clark shut the doors behind them. He had not spoken to Sina or looked at her.

She remained before the closed doors, studying them with dull, unseeing eyes. Finally, she turned away and walked uncertainly along the balcony to a chair. Her legs were shaking as she sat down and she pressed her hands against her face. "Nuncio did that. He wanted to kill me. It's impossible that he could believe a few kisses so important! He looked insane—maybe he is."

But Sina knew that he was not.

SINA did not know how long she had been on the balcony before she became aware of music and the rising hum of voices. The party and her guests had been forgotten!

She straightened her hair and dress before opening the doors into the library, where half a dozen couples were dancing. In the dining room menservants stood before the buffet, serving champagne.

Gordon Canning was talking with her aunt. Margarita caught sight of her and her eyes blazed. But when Margarita spoke her tones were sweetly concerned. "How are you now, Chickita? I hope the headache's gone."

"Yes. Oh, yes." Then Sina smiled at Canning.

He asked: "Maybe you'll dance with me?"

She went into his arms, but could not respond to his glance or his touch. She was still seeing the knife flashing through the moonlight.

"You're even more beautiful tonight," Canning said, and his hand tightened on hers.

Where had Neil Clark taken Nuncio?

She pushed her lips into an imitation of her usual slow, warm smile and made herself listen to Canning.

"You're more than just a beautiful girl. You're life—a part of life a man can see and touch . . . can hold." The shrewdness had left his eyes. They were almost boyish now.

Sina said dully: "Maybe a little of the headache is still with me. Let's rest for a while."

"But not here," he said, and taking her arm, turned into the conservatory. "I noticed this place was empty, so maybe we'll have a few minutes alone."

She sat beside him on an Empire sofa which, like the house, had been rented. Sina knew what he intended to say. It was as easy as this—wealth and everything she had always wanted!

"Sina," he did not touch her but his eyes were claiming, "this isn't as abrupt as it'll seem—and it has nothing to do with impulse, either. You're the only girl I've ever met whom I could really love."

"*Could* really love?" she asked, and the tiny white lights of challenge showed in the depths of her eyes.

"That means," he murmured, and his hands touched her wrists, slid up her smooth arms to her shoulders. "I love you and the better I get to know you, the greater my love will be.

"Will you marry me, Sina? Right away?"

"But why? I mean, 'right away'—"

"Because that's how I want it. We'll get married tomorrow without all the silly preparations, then we'll tell your aunt—and leave for a honeymoon in Paris."

"I—" But her words stopped as sharply as if hands were closing about her lovely throat.

Canning, his arms heavy, was drawing her close. He kissed her quickly, almost awkwardly. She thought: *Paris. From there we'll go to London—or maybe London will be first. Aunt Margarita'll have the money she wants and I'll have freedom.* His mouth was smooth and pleasant. But this was not the urgent, demanding kiss which might be given to lips wet with wine.

"Gordon," she remained, for a moment, in his arms. "Aunt Margarita would lose her mind if I did such a thing. Besides, we only met a few hours ago and it's too soon for us to be sure." She looked up at him with her eyes very dark and deep. "I have to be sure about this—about us. Don't you understand?"

Dark color washed into his face and spread along his jaw. "Your aunt's not important, but it is important for you to be sure of your own feeling. If I have to wait for you to decide that, promise it won't be long?"

She nodded and made her lashes into a veil over her eyes. "I promise," she said; added quickly: "I'd like to be alone for just a few minutes—so I can get used to thinking about us. I'll wait here while you bring some champagne."

"Right away, darling."

As soon as he was out of the room she left the sofa and paced nervously toward the door, wishing for a cigarette. Nuncio had long ago taught her to smoke, a fact which she carefully concealed.

Nuncio!

"It can't be as bad as that." The words were spoken in a deep voice which should have been musical but was not. Instead, the sound seemed to leave a hard, edged echo behind it.

A slight, fair man was standing directly before her in the doorway and she knew he had been standing there, watching her for several minutes.

As he came into the room, the first impression of youthfulness faded. His dress clothes were the smartest she had ever seen and his eyes were more than old. They were filled with ghosts. "You want something," he said. "And you're accustomed to having what you want."

She hesitated, but, as the haunted, tired eyes met hers, she laughed. "I was wishing I had a cigarette. Of course, I don't admit that I've ever smoked, but still I'd like one."

"Why not?" He took out a gold case. "These are good."

"I couldn't. If I were seen—"

"You won't be. I'll watch the door."

His glance told her he knew she would accept the cigarette, so, smiling, she took it. He lit it and said: "Of course you know you're very beautiful."

She was silent and he insisted: "Don't you?"

"Perhaps. Yes."

"How'd you happen to come to this party? I don't think many of the guests know Margarita Carbeza. I've heard of her niece and so has everyone else in San Francisco. I suppose she bought a list of the right names."

Sina stiffened. "Is that the way it's done? Lists of names can be bought if you want to give a party?"

"Cheap, too."

"Then, why did you come tonight when you don't even know the hostess."

"I thought it might be worth seeing. That reminds me—watch it, someone's heading this way! My name's Drake—Robert Drake. Here they come. Get rid of the smoke."

She dropped the cigarette and he stepped on it. Gordon Canning came up to them with a glass of champagne in each hand.

Drake sprang up. "Canning! You, too!"

Gordon Canning put down the glasses and shook hands without much enthusiasm. "You've already met Miss Carbeza?"

"Carbeza?" Drake repeated, but without surprise or embarrassment."

Sina said: "Yes. Margarita Carbeza is my aunt. I'm the niece you said you'd heard about." Her dark eyes showed their white, sharp points of light.

Drake grinned with obvious delight. "This really gets our friendship started," he said.

"Meaning what?" Canning demanded.

"We were talking about San Francisco

people—and parties," Sina said quickly. "Thanks for the champagne. I'm thirsty."

"None for me?" Drake asked.

"Certainly not," said Gordon Canning. "Sina and I were being very happy alone—before you arrived."

"In that case," Drake said easily, "continue, children. I'm going home." He nodded at Canning and bent, almost mockingly, over the girl's hand.

Sina watched him leave and said: "He's interesting."

Canning, his eyes on the floor, snapped: "Depends on what that means. There's nothing he hasn't done. Or if there is he's hoping for a chance to do it. He inherited a fortune and his only work is spending it. The story of his life wouldn't make pretty reading."

E BENT and picked up the half smoked cigarette which she had dropped. Holding it, he looked at her. "Was there anyone besides Drake here while I was gone?"

"No," she said, and flame leaped from her throat into her face. What was the matter with her? All she had to do was laugh or remind him of herself. . . .

"I see." He dropped the cigarette. "You and Drake got quite friendly, apparently. You sat here, where everyone could see you, and smoked—with a man like that!"

"But Gordon—" She stopped, for her own anger was rising, meeting his, sweeping above it. "Why should I lie?" she demanded. "Yes, I smoked a cigarette. Do you consider that unforgivable?"

"Stop it. You know how it would have looked to anyone else, and I hope you'll never do such a thing again. We won't mention it—"

"No, we won't. You seem to have forgotten I'm not married or even engaged to you. I said I needed time, but now—"

"Sina." He took her hands and the cool smoothness of his touch, shattered her unreasoning fury. Why was she being so stupid? Canning wanted to marry her and she and her aunt had gambled everything they possessed on the chance of her making such a marriage.

"I' m sorry," she said, and her eyes and softly curving lips also apologized. "I told you my headache was better, but it's really much worse. That's the reason why—"

"Of course." He drew her up to her feet. "I'll tell your aunt to see that you go to bed right away."

They found Margarita. And when she finished assuring Gordon Canning that "Chickita" would be tenderly cared for, he said goodnight; adding: "I'll stop in tomorrow afternoon to be sure you're all right."

When he had left, Margarita murmured to Sina: "You're cleverer than I thought."

Sina did not answer. For as Canning departed, Neil Clark was bowed in by one of the numerous menservants who had been hired as an impressive touch to the party. And for the first time, she realized that Clark was also wearing formal clothes. They were well tailored and he carried them with surprising ease.

He came directly to her. He said in a cool, amused voice:

"Yes, I rented the glad rags. I had to talk to you. Nuncio sent you a message. Let's go back to that gallery."

Her lips broke apart but she held back the swift words of protest and followed him into the library. When they reached the gallery he once more closed the doors carefully behind them. "I thought you'd like to know," he said in flat tones. "I took Nuncio to a bar and bought him a drink. We talked for a long time. He's all right now. I got him a room at my hotel—the Great Western. He asked me to tell you he's sorry, that he really doesn't want to harm you, but will always try to help you and—protect you. He," Clark's voice was gentle with irony, "sent you his love."

"Are you sure he's—sane again?"

Clark moved his hand impatiently. "He was sane all the time. Maybe he's different than you and your friends. Nuncio's a simple, gentle hombre you've been playing with. It's not safe to play with human emotions. When he blew up, he hadn't gone insane—he couldn't stand your torment any longer."

"You believe that, don't you?" Sina said. "You think I deliberately made him care for me, just to—"

He finished it for her: "Just to amuse yourself, yes. I hope tonight woke him up, though, and that he'll never again want to kill."

The stillness of his eyes and the new

thinness of his mouth made her want to arouse him into awareness of her. What would he be like when shaken by overwhelming emotion? The small, sharp lights stirred restlessly in her eyes.

"You couldn't ever lose control of yourself, could you?" she asked.

"Not to the point of killing. I've seen enough of death in the Civil War. That's why I left Texas—to stop remembering what it was like. But Sina—" he leaned toward her, although his eyes neither warmed nor challenged— "a war teaches a man about women as well as death. There are always women in war because the war sweeps over them and their homes. They can't live by the rules, but they're not like you. With them, it's not a game."

"You think I'm—wanton?"

He shook his head and the thinness left his mouth. "That's not true. You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. But it's enough for me just to look at you."

She laughed, letting the sound start deep in her throat. "That's all? Just to look at me?" And her face tilted so that the light

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found the luster of her mouth and the soft moulding of her throat.

"Yes, but as long as you want more. . . ." He let his words trail off and bent over her. He did not hurry or force her into his arms. When his mouth took hers, she was conscious of shock. The shock of knowing she was offering complete surrender, for she was clinging to him and the new fire in her lips would not permit the kiss to end.

His hands dropped and he stepped away from her. "Good night, Sina."

"Wait, Neil. I'm glad you kissed me. It meant something special—as if it would keep me from ever again being afraid."

His eyelids shuttered together as he stared at her. "I don't know how you mean that—but if you're smart, you'll really be afraid now." He walked swiftly away from her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Talk of the Town

AS SOON as Sina opened her eyes the next morning, the maid came in with a breakfast tray and two florists' boxes. "It's almost ten, Miss, and your aunt's waiting for you to go shopping."

Sina sat up and reached for the boxes. One of them was from Gordon Canning and held fragrant mountain roses. In the other, containing a single, huge scarlet rose, was Robert Drake's card. Both men must have arranged for their offerings the night before.

She smiled, her fingers touched the flower petals, and at that second a piercing scream rang through the house. Sina sprang out of bed, the breakfast tray crashing to the floor, and ran into the hall.

Margarita was coming up the stairs and she was screaming hysterically. A newspaper was clenched in one hand. As Sina appeared, Margarita waved it.

Sina asked: "What's happened? Be still for a minute! Tell me—"

"Go into your room—I'll tell you!" The woman panted in after her and slammed the door. "Look!" she shrieked.

Sina took the newspaper and straightened it out. And then her breath paused as her heart lifted in a great stroke which shook her flesh. Across the front page of the *Morning Bulletin* was a sharp black headline:

ROBERT DRAKE SHOT
OVER RANGE BEAUTY

Below, in slightly smaller type, was the statement:

NUNCIO MORENO ATTEMPTS TO KILL WEALTHY CALIFORNIAN BECAUSE OF THOMASINA CARBEZA.

The story ran swiftly:

Moreno, who later admitted his infatuation with beautiful Miss Carbeza, encountered Robert Drake in the bar of the Great Western, where Drake has an apartment. The name of the Spanish beauty from the range was mentioned and Drake is said to have made disparaging remarks, whereupon Moreno shot him.

In the excitement of getting Drake to a hospital, where he is said to be close to death, Moreno disappeared and cannot be located by the police.

Miss Thomasina Carbeza came to San Francisco with her aunt less than three months ago and her beauty has become the talk of the town. However, there appears to be considerable mystery as to the Carbezas' social and financial background—

Sina stopped reading. She folded the paper and put it down on the dressing table. Neil Clark had rented a room for Nuncio at the Great Western the night before. He must have returned the gun he had taken away from him earlier. And after Neil left, Nuncio had gone to the bar. Drake had probably met him there only a few minutes after saying good night to her and Gordon Canning.

"What could he have said about me?" she wondered. "It might have been anything. He had the eyes and face of a man with a bitter heart and bitter tongue. Poor Nuncio!"

"Don't stand there!" Margarita shrilled. "Do you know what this means? We'll have to leave San Francisco. No one will want to know us now, so what will we do?"

"I haven't the least idea." Sina's voice was dull.

"Why, we can't even return to the ranch! That'll go to pay some of our debts—What are you doing?"

"Dressing. I'm going out."

"Where?"

The girl shook her head. "Don't ask me.

I won't tell you." Her low, heavy tone silenced the woman.

As Sina got into a dark blue street dress, Margarita murmured: "I'll send for the carriage."

Ten minutes later Sina was ready. She had topped off the demure frock with a hat of burgandy which was almost the exact shade of her mouth. Wearing gloves of the same color and carrying a huge blue bag, she went downstairs, where her aunt was waiting.

"I'll be back soon," Sina said and hurried through the front door to the round porch from which a flight of marble steps led down to the street.

The driver eyed her as she told him: "Take me to the hospital. I'm not sure of the name, but it's near the Great Western Hotel."

"Yes, Ma'am. The one where they took Mr. Drake."

She said nothing. The top of the carriage was down and as it turned into Kearney, people began to stare. Market, for all its breadth, was worse. And when the carriage stopped before the hospital, men, women and children appeared from nowhere. They circled around her as she entered the building and even the attendant at the desk was knowing.

"Mr. Drake isn't allowed to have visitors, Ma'am. His condition is dangerous."

"How soon do you think—that is, when can he have visitors?"

"I don't know, Miss Carbeza. You *are* Miss Carbeza, aren't you? Thought so. Well, you can't see him for some time, in my opinion. But it is for the doctor to decide."

Still she hesitated. The door to the street was opening and closing constantly. She saw that a curious crowd had collected at the door.

"Sina." The quiet voice said her name in tones she had never before heard. She turned to Neil Clark.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"The same as you, probably."

"I'm waiting for Drake's doctor," Neil said. "I'd like to know if he has a chance. I hope so—for Nuncio's sake."

"I guess that's why I came, too. I thought, if Drake could talk, he might be able to—tell me something."

Clark bent down and looked into her face. "Don't take it like this. It wasn't your fault and Drake deserved everything he got."

"But what'll happen to Nuncio?"

"That depends. Even if Drake dies, nothing much may be done. Most people in this town would regard the killing as a public service and the police won't wear themselves out looking for Moreno."

"Still—"

"Let's go. I can see the doctor later and you need to get home."

He took her arm and the people pressing around the door dropped back to let them through. "I'll take you home," he said, getting into the carriage after her.

THE driver turned the horses back onto Market and they seemed to travel at a walk. There were more people on the streets now and groups of them stopped to stare. They called to others to join them and stood, silently watching. Among them were men and women who had been guests in her home the night before, but no one spoke or even nodded.

Sina's cheeks were on fire, but her chin was tilted and her dark eyes stormy. She clenched her hands in her lap.

Neil Clark put his own over them. "This isn't like you. And you'll have to do better if you're going to carry it off."

"What do you mean? Everyone in this town thinks I've driven a man to murder. They won't let me even try to carry anything off."

"Oh, yes, they will—if you know how. Laugh at 'em, Sina. Go right on your way. For a while it'll be tough. But if you ignore the whole business, take the attitude that it isn't your fault you're so beautiful men lose their minds, they'll begin to agree with you. This is new country and pretty raw. They like people who'll fight."

Her dark glance stabbed at him. "How you've changed," she said angrily. "Or maybe you've forgotten what you said last night—what you said the first time we met."

"No. I haven't forgotten, but maybe I'm just realizing I liked you the way you were. You had something—special, Sina. Ruthless as you were with men, you were natural as the earth and the vines from which you got the wine to wet your kisses."

Her lips broke apart, but her words came slowly: "You draw an ugly picture."

"It doesn't sound ugly to me. And maybe that's the trouble now. Maybe you needed the earth and the vines to stay alive in your own way. Maybe—"

"Please," she said, and her voice was a thin cry.

The carriage stopped before the house. She told him quickly: "Thanks for bringing me home, but please don't come to the door with me."

He nodded. "You don't want to see me any longer than necessary. All right—for now. But I'll be back later in the day, Sina. Seems I've got a job to do."

She did not answer, but hurried up to the marble steps. And, as she reached the pillared round porch, her aunt opened the door.

"I'm glad you've come," she said, her eyes sparkling. "Mr. Canning—Gordon Canning's here. Perhaps everything's not hopeless."

Her shoulders sagged. "I can't talk it to him now. Ask him to excuse me—until tomorrow."

Margarita exploded. "You will go right into the living room and see him. He's the one chance left to us."

"No—" But she stopped herself and, with a faint lift of her shoulders, started for the living room.

Canning got up, dropping a newspaper he had been reading. His face was grave and he met her with outstretched hands. "Darling girl, I'm so sorry about this. I wish I could have prevented it."

"Thanks." She sat down wearily on the couch facing the big fireplace, still banked with greenery from last night's party.

"My dear," he put his arm around her, "there's still a great deal left of your life."

Her dark glance lifted to his face. "Thank you," she murmured with a whisper of mockery in her tones.

"This is one of those unfortunate accidents to which you'll have to—adjust. It'll change things for you, but it needn't ruin your whole existence. Later, people will have forgotten all about it."

She stirred out of his arm. "I don't understand you."

His blue eyes held hers, but they were not as dazzled as the night before. Instead, they were shrewdly measuring. "Sina, let's look at the situation honestly, and save what we can. You know how I feel—I told you I love you. We would have been married, except for this. Now, such a marriage might mean considerable difficulty and even financial loss. Some of my banking connections would suffer badly. Yet, we have a right to our love and I think I have the answer. Discretion is all we need now. Later on, people will forget all about this . . . and perhaps we can marry."

Her slim young body was stiffening. "Go on," she said softly.

"You can't stay in San Francisco now. This," he picked up the paper he had been reading and held it out to her, "is worse than the morning editions."

She took it from him, looked at it almost indifferently. It was the *Afternoon Alta*, and the headline said:

ROBERT DRAKE CLOSE TO DEATH
BEAUTY'S PAST REVEALED

With wealthy Robert Drake close to death after being shot by a servant in love with his mistress, Miss Thomasina Carbeza, I went up to the range country to discover exactly who and what the Spanish beauty might be. I discovered some unusual facts. Miss Carbeza's much talked of "ancestral home," the "Rancho Maria" is an unused stretch of prairie and brush, where the chief product seems to be wine from a small vineyard. "Sina," as the people there call her, is known for her ability to fascinate men. She is frequently referred to as *Señorita Wolf*.

Her mouth and throat were dry as she handed back the newspaper. "Since you don't believe I can stay here, you think I should return to the ranch?"

"No." He took her hands again, and drew her closer. "We'll pretend that you're going there. You and your aunt will leave for the Santa Maria, but I'll meet you. We'll leave Margarita on the place and go on to New York. I'll arrange for transportation and for—well, complete secrecy. In New York, no one will know you or be interested. From there we'll go to Europe. After that, well—time will take care of the situation."

"I see." Her glance moved over his face; taking in the calculation of his blue eyes, the non-revealing mouth, the assurance stamped on every feature. "You want me to accept the role they've put me in—you want me to *be* what they say I am. I'll

go across the continent and even to Europe with you—"

"You'll have everything in the world, darling. Beautiful clothes, jewels, excitement."

She nodded. "Everything except marriage. Maybe that would be the best part of it. Maybe marriage to you would be pretty terrible—for any woman." She got up and said: *"Adios, amigo mio."*

"Sina! You don't understand. I'm trying to help you—"

She did not answer until she reached the door, where she paused and looked back at him. Once more her deeply-hued mouth was curved questioningly and the tiny white lights of challenge were in her eyes.

"You'd better try to help yourself. You need help more than I do."

CHAPTER FIVE

Song of the Heart

THE mist-hazed afternoon was graying into twilight when the upstairs maid, after the briefest of knocks, came into Sina's room. "I haven't been able to speak to your aunt, Ma'am, because she's in bed with a headache, so I'll have to tell you this. I'm quitting. This will be my last day of work here."

Sina nodded and met the woman's knowing gaze. "I'll see that your wages are waiting for you."

"Thank you, Miss, and there's a gentleman waiting for you downstairs. He's been here quite awhile, but I was too busy to tell you." She went out.

Sina, smiling thinly, went downstairs, telling herself that even if Canning had returned to offer marriage, she did not want him. Life with him would mean living in dry storage!

But it was Neil Clark who came swiftly across the living room to meet her. He was wearing the range clothes in which she had first seen him: gray flannel shirt, jeans, leather boots and a gun against his thigh.

His gray glance took in everything about her. And then he smiled. "Good," he said softly. "You're beginning to see you have to ride it out. I'll bet you're a pretty good horse-woman, Sina."

"Meaning what?"

"Just that right now this town is like a bronc in need of breaking. You've got to break it."

"How?"

"Easy. Show 'em they're not important to you and that you'll go right on with your life as if none of them existed. We'll start right now, by going out to the Cliff House. Everyone's there at this time of day, pouring down liquor to give them strength for the evening."

"I'm not sure—" Her glance dropped to his clothes.

His grin turned into a chuckle. "The idea, Sina, is to make 'em see we're ourselves and intend to go on being ourselves. They can be whatever they want."

Her glance was caught up into his gray eyes, and warmth spread up her throat into her face, making her lips glow as she remembered—his mouth against hers, with the taste of the wine being lost. . . .

"All right. Wait for me. I'll be right down."

She ran out of the room and, as she reached her room, the laughter was back in her throat. She changed her clothes swiftly, and carrying a broad, brown felt hat,

went back to meet him in the living room.

"How's this?" she demanded, as she entered.

His laugh rang through the space between them. "Good. Perfect," he said, as she posed to show her costume of short, brown, divided riding skirt, yellow silk blouse, brown neckerchief and soft brown boots. Her belt was broad and ornately carved. She could have posed for a picture of an actress interpreting the "Beauty of the Range."

"Come on." He drew her arm through his. "I hired a buckboard—driving myself. We'll get to the Cliff House at just the right time."

He drove the two-horse team at top speed. Skirting the town, they drove through the park to the Beach. But on the empty road, half a mile from the Cliff House, he pulled in. "There's just one thing, Sina," he murmured, "in case you're still a little mixed up."

And, he took her into his arms. His mouth called flame into hers, and her hands slipped up to his shoulders, as she returned his kiss. Once more the realization of her own surrender ran through her, but now it brought no shock. Her eyes closed as her own world drifted away and she sensed again, that other world which was his.

As he released her, she smiled with deliberate languor. He had kissed her before, but without meaning, and he had warned her that she ought to be afraid. Perhaps he had meant afraid of him.

He did not return her smile. Instead, he took up the reins and snapped the whip. "All right," he murmured, as the horses started forward. "Guess I was wrong again."

As they stopped at the Cliff House, an attendant took charge of their carriage. And, as soon as they entered the great room overlooking the ocean, the high hum of voices stopped.

The waiter hesitated and then bowed uncertainly. He led them toward one of the window tables and Sina kept her arm in Neil's as they followed. Her lips were warm and her eyes very dark, her skin glowed with soft inner light.

The restaurant remained quiet, even after they had been seated, although here and there a few people began to talk in subdued tones. A sharp female voice called to the head waiter to "bring the check at once."

The owner of the voice then swept out indignantly. Three other women and their escorts followed, their eyes darting at Sina as they left.

The eyes of those remaining did not merely dart. They fixed on the girl and remained there, in fascinated study. No one spoke or acknowledged her presence, however, even though many of them had been entertained in the Sacramento Street house.

"Neil," she said softly as the waiter served the rum punch, "will you excuse me? I won't be away—long."

She pushed back her chair and, with her chin high, walked toward the orchestra stand at the far end of the room. As she approached, the leader waited.

She handed him two gold coins. "I wish you would play *La Paloma*. I will sing it."

He hesitated, glanced over the restaurant, and then grinned. "Yes, Miss." And he signaled his orchestra.

As the song began, Sina faced the amazed onlookers. "You'll all enjoy this," she said clearly. "It expresses the way I feel about San Francisco."

She swept easily into the lyric, singing in a small, but clear, rich voice. But the audience froze as they heard her words, for they were a taunting Mexican parody:

And if a donkey should come to your window,
Treat it with kindness, for it is my soul
Its braying will hurt, but not kill you
'Tis a miserable thing—the voice of my soul.

The orchestra crashed out the end with brazen insult. And the musicians' laughter could be heard above it.

The rest of the room remained completely silent. In fact, it was as still as if everyone had stopped breathing.

Sina went back to Neil Clark and, with a small laugh starting deep in her throat, said: "I'm ready to go."

"So am I." He grinned and, getting up, offered her his arm.

The silence held as they went out.

When the attendant brought their carriage, they looked at each other with new, gay understanding.

Clark, however, did not speak until they neared the top of Market Street, where he

(Please continue on page 97)

Pin-Up Girl

This spirited beauty's a right tasty dish

And she certainly knows what's cookin'

To share her fine supper, is plainly her wish—

.....

To finish the limerick in this February contest just write the last line on a postcard and mail to Pin-up Girl, RANGELAND ROMANCES, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. The winner will be awarded one year's subscription to RANGELAND ROMANCES. In cases of ties, prizes of equal value will be awarded. All entries for this February contest must be in our office at the above address by midnight on January 24th, 1946. The judges' decision will be final. . . . **See announcement of winner of November contest on page 91.**

♥ LOVABLE ♥ FIRE BRAT

By Lillian Lane

Tomboy Theodora was confidant her daring new gown would make Hal realize that she was a luscious woman—yet she decided to utterly destroy it.

THEODORA held the plank firm while Hal drove home the nail. His arm touched hers. Under her, the wood shivered with the blow of his hammer. He was leaning that close to her, his mouth was only inches away. Theodora felt herself sway toward him. She gripped the plank more firmly, tightened her fingers to keep steady, to keep from making a fool of herself.

How could one man be that handsome? His shoulders were as broad as the doorway of his new cabin. His lips were full and generous, quick to pick up a smile and carry it to his deep brown eyes.

Or did the fact that she was in love with him, so very much in love, make him seem more handsome to her than he really was? *No. Melita thinks he's handsome, too.*

The thought of Melita pulled Theodora's own soft lips tight with determination. *That dancehall girl! That painted fluff!* Melita's artificial beauty had blinded Hal; she had more than half the men of Curaches Valley running after her.

But Hal had sense. He must have intelligence enough to realize that the town girl would be no bride for him. He needed a wife who knew the land and could work at his side to help him build his small spread and his new homestead into a real ranch, the way Theodora had helped him plan his cabin and the way she was helping him now to cover the deep new well.

Hal swung his long legs around and dropped himself to the ground. He held up his arms to Theodora. "Jump?"

She stood at the edge of the shed over the well, looked down at him. The sun was full on his tanned face. She couldn't look at him too long; she knew that. Looking at Hal, just being near him, made her all weak and light inside, like she was built of summer wind and tumbleweed.

She jumped, the red-checkered gingham dress billowing around her knees as he caught her, laughing. She held tight to him, getting her balance. Only, holding onto Hal didn't help her get her balance at all.

He stood back and looked at the shed, hands on his hips, then turned to her. "Thanks, Ted. You're a real neighbor to help me like this."

"It was fun." *Much more than fun.* Theodora held her smile steady, neighborly. "If you come over to the house, I'll give you a piece of berry cake. I baked it this morning."

Hal frowned slightly and she saw the conflict in his eyes. "I'd like to, Ted," he told her, "but I should go into town. There's some business I have to attend to."

She knew all about *that* business. Melita. "I whipped some cream for the cake," she coaxed.

"Well—" His grin was slow. "Okay. You know I can't resist."

For a moment, she was jealous of her own cooking ability. She wished she could fill his eyes with the eagerness her mention of the berry cake had stirred. But it would take more than that. To Hal, she was the Brat. Ted not Theodora.

As tophand on Pa's neighboring Bar X ranch, Hal had helped Theodora grow up. He remembered her as the lanky, freckle-nosed youngster who sat on the corral fence shouting him on while he broke horses. He remembered her as the kid who fell into the irrigation ditch, the child who

She would have to use her dress to start a backfire. . . .

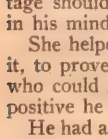
stood caked in baking soda that time she had poison ivy.

Hal taught her to rope and to ride and to cut trail for sign. He taught her to fish and to hunt. He also taught her to fall in love with him. But he didn't know about that. Sometimes, Theodora wanted to take him by the shoulders and shake him and say: *"Look at me! I'm not the Brat any more. I'm a woman."*

Oh, those dreams she had built! When Hal had bought the land from Pa to start his own spread, Theodora was sure he was thinking of settling down with a wife. When he had talked over the plans for the cottage, told her about the kitchen the cottage should have, she was sure what was in his mind.

She helped plan it and helped him build it, to prove she was the kind of a woman who could work beside her man; she was positive he had a bride in mind.

He had a bride in mind all right. *Melita!*



WALKING with him now through the tinder-dry woods and across the flatland to the Bar X ranch house, Theodora realized again it would take more than being a pal to Hal to open his eyes to her. She had to make him know she was a woman. And that wasn't easy, after all these years of being the Brat.

When the clothes arrived from the mail order house in Chicago, maybe he *would* change his mind. They were the kind of gowns Melita might wear. When Hal saw her dressed like that—

"Glory, it's dry." His boots kicked up the dust. "We don't get rain soon, won't be much use my having a new well."

Theodora thought of the small pool of water in the bottom of that deep well. "The cattle are all right," she said. "Plenty of water in the stream."

"Sure. They're all right. But not having enough water makes it kind of uncomfortable living in the new cabin—least, it would for someone not used to it."

So, it had gone that far. Hal was that close to asking Melita to become his bride.

Theodora laughed and tried to make her words casual: "There are a lot of things somebody not used to living on a ranch wouldn't like. It takes a real love of the land to—"

Hal's expression stopped her. She couldn't make it out. He looked for a minute as if she had flushed out of hiding something he had been trying not to see. "People learn."

"Some people do." She opened the kitchen door. She could feel the way Hal frowned after her, wondering what she had meant by that. "Pull a chair to the table," she told him. "I'll have this mixed in a jiffy."

He watched with obvious approval as Theodora ladled thick cream from the bowl to the top of the golden brown cake. "You sure can ride herd on the kitchen corral, Ted."

Her mouth set. Holding the bowl, her fingers trembled angrily. Was that all he could see in her: a good cook, a helpful neighbor, the Brat?

"You make the best berry cake—"

The bowl slipped. She grabbed for it, caught awkwardly at the air.

The whipped cream splashed, splattered on her dress, dripped to the floor.

Theodore stood there, hands limp, looking down at the mess.

Hal laughed. His eyes watered and he held his sides, laughing.

She whirled around. "It's not that funny."

Instantly, his laugh died, but a touch of the smile stayed on his lips as he tried to hold it in. He went to the sink, took a rag, squeezed it out. "Here. . . . I'll wipe it off."

He rubbed the cloth with deft, quick strokes. "There. I reckon that will—" His hand dropped and he stood looking at her.

Sudden warmth touched red to her cheeks and she felt the pulse jump in her throat. "Thanks, Hal." She turned. "I'm sorry I was—angry. I guess it did look funny."

"Wait a minute" He put out his hand to hold her. His other arm went around her. His kiss was hard, abrupt. She clung to him, lost in that sweet wild fire of her first real kiss.

Hal moved back. His forced laugh was unsteady and his eyes were clearly troubled. "There," he tried to pretend. "Kiss and make it well. I guess you're fixed all right now, Brat." He said it as if he had kissed her forehead after she had fallen and

skinned her knee, or as if he had kissed the fingers she had burned roasting weiners over a camp fire.

Brat! He thought he could fool himself with that. She took the cloth, squeezed it out. "Thanks, Hal. I'll mix some more cream for your cake."

He swallowed hard. "I reckon I'd better skip that for now. I do have to get to town."

Her eyes held his. "You know what you want."

Hal swallowed again, cleared his throat. "I have to go. I promised—I mean, I have to see—somebody."

"Of course, Hal," Theodora said sweetly. "I'm not trying to keep you from—your business."

He went to the door, looked back, frowning uncertainly again. "I'll be back this evening. Why don't you come over to the cabin—if you have nothing else to do? I want to talk to you about those curtains."

CURTAINS to fix up the cabin for Melita! Theodora was sorry now she had promised to make them for him. *Kisses for Melita!* It was worse now that she knew what Hal's kiss—that kind of a kiss—could mean. "Maybe," she told him. "If Pa doesn't need me to help him with his ranch accounts."

"Well." He lifted his hand. "Be seeing you, Ted."

"Oh, sure."

She heard the door shut, listened to his boots down the steps. She went to the window and watched him cross to the dry woods and the trail to his cabin. Angrily, she picked up the cloth, wet it, and wiped the spilled cream from the table.

Who was it had said there was no use crying over spilled milk? She felt like crying just the same.

But Theodora felt much better when Pa returned from town that afternoon with the packages from Chicago. It was an omen that those dresses should arrive today, when there was so little time left to save Hal from Melita.

Theodora carried them to her room and closed the door, excitedly cut the strings.

Her breath caught as she pushed back the tissue paper. The flame satin gown was enough to take anyone's breath away.

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Theodora held it up to herself, dancing over to the mirror, turning around. It *was* daring. Even the way it swished against her legs seemed to whisper secrets.

And the blue! Puffs of tulle caught up like moonbeams around the low neck of it. Star silver in the wide sweep of the veil-like skirt that covered the long white lace-ruffled petticoat.

She couldn't decide. She held up one dress and then the other. Theodora was sure that even Melita had nothing so beautiful.

When she finally decided upon the blue and put it on, she was even more certain. Without the slightest conceit, she knew she looked as lovely as a dream.

Wearing the gown seemed to fill her with an inner beauty. She knew she was beautiful; that knowledge was in the way she held her head, in the way she walked gracefully across the room. Not the Brat now, but completely, charmingly—Theodora.

She frowned slightly, trying to think what excuse she would give Hal for wearing a dress like this through the woods to his cabin. And then a slow smile widened her lips. The loveliness of this gown needed no excuse: it was its own full reason. When Hal saw her in it, the questions in his eyes and his heart would be big ones—not why she was wearing it, but that he hadn't discovered her beauty before.

It made even Pa blink. He got up from his worn green Morris chair by the window and came over to her slowly, held her hands. "You love him a lot, don't you?"

Wordlessly, Theodora nodded. There were no words to answer that.

"I've hoped a long time it would work out right with you two," Pa said. "Hal's a good man."

"I know that." She smiled.

He shook his head. "But I don't know about your wearing frippy clothes like that. Hal needs a wife who can work beside him. A solid, loving—"

"I'll never be his bride until he knows I'm a woman."

"Theodora!" But Pa grinned. "Maybe you're right at that." He patted her hand. "I'd sure like to see Hal's face when he sees you in that."

"Oh, Pa! I do look pretty?"

His hands hugged her arms. "My dear, you look almost—as beautiful as your mother did."

She kissed his cheek, held tight to him.

Crossing to the woods, she felt wings grow on her feet. She felt light enough, happy enough to be carried by the wind.

There was no light in Hal's cabin, but a ground-reined horse stood close to the door and a man sat on the newly-planked cabin steps.

As Theodora approached, he struck a match, lighted a cigarette and tossed the match from his fingers. In the light, she saw the man was Melita's brother, Avila.

Avila saw her then; asked: "You know where is Hal?" He stood and swept off his sombrero with an exaggerated bow. "I wait for him—long time."

"Why—No. Hal went into town. I thought he. . . . Is anything wrong?"

AVILA shrugged, spun the cigarette from his fingers. "My sister, Melita, she send me for to look for him." His shoulders lifted again. "All the time, she send me places—this and that." He scowled impatiently. "You wait. You tell Hal she's very angry? You wait?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm going to wait for Hal. He should be back now."

"Good." Avila went to his horse. "You tell him. I go play cards."

Theodora smiled after him, waited until Avila moved his horse down the trail before she went to the steps and sat down. She could just imagine herself telling Hal that Melita was waiting for him!

Carefully she rearranged her skirt, so the folds were even. She fussed with the filmy tulle ruff, touched her hair.

Impatiently, she waited, listening for Hal's horse to come up the trail, wondering about Melita. The only sound was the wind in the trees, a crackling in the trees.

Theodora stood and opened the cabin door an inch. Hal would be tired. Maybe she should fix him some coffee.

No! She took her hand from the door. This was one time she wouldn't be the helpful neighbor, the Brat. There would be no practical touch to remind him, to spoil the picture she made in this beautifully impractical blue gown.

The crackling of the wind in the woods was louder. It was a more regular sound.

Theodora listened and she stared. *It wasn't the wind.*

She squinted to see into the darkness. There was a faint glow among the trees. It might be reflected moonlight.

Suddenly, there was a burst of red, a sucking sound like some giant drawing a breath. Smoke. Flames!

A hand of flame reached up and caught the branch of a tree. The tree blazed red like a match in the hand of a giant. *The match and the cigarette Melita's brother had tossed into the woods!*

The flames spread angrily, sweeping out to the sides of the clearing. Before she could move from the steps, a curtain of red fire hissed through the woods, crackling menacingly as the wind drove it.

For a terrified moment, Theodora watched. The flames moved toward Hal's cabin and the shed of the well in front of the cabin, closer to the woods.

Only another fire could stop that fire now!

Theodora turned, ran into the cabin, found the matches. She heard the skirt of her dress rip as she hurried down the steps again and raced to the edge of the clearing.

She crouched, struck a match, touched it to a bush. She moved along, set the blaze to another bush. It sputtered, flamed.

But the gap was too great for the flames to leap. The big fire moved closer as the small fire she had started flickered and died.

The wall of smoke closed in. A tree toppled, sent its sparks scattering to other trees standing to catch the flame.

She looked down at the dress. She shut her eyes. Her mouth set. She would have to use her dress to start a back fire. . . . Reaching down, Theodora ripped away the skirt. She tore at the sleeves of the dress.

Running, draping the cloth from bush to bush, she struck a match. Another.

Like a fuse, the cloth raced with the fire through the brush, building a growing wall of fire to burn out an open space and meet the other fire coming on.

Standing there in the smudged white petticoat, her hair disordered, a black streak on her cheek, Theodora watched the second blaze burn out a patch the big fire could not leap.

A tree fell, sparks showered around her. She heard him then. Hal!

Coming back to his cabin, he must have seen the flames a mile or more away. He was riding hard, racing.

Hal came into the clearing, swung down from the horse, saw her and ran to her. He looked at what she had done. "Thank God." His arm went around her. "You knew what to do."

The helpful neighbor. The Brat. She had saved the cabin. But the blue dress, the starry vision of beauty that was to prove to Hal she was a woman—

Another tree crashed, splintered. Another. The crackling hiss of the fire was so loud they couldn't talk.

The heat swept toward them, engulfed them. "The well!" she shouted.

Together, they ran to the well. Hal held her, let her down easily into the well, swung himself over the edge and dropped into it beside her.

The water was cool against her legs, sloshed at her waist.

(Please continue on page 96)

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TRAPPED IN PARADISE

They had been trapped in nature's most beautiful valley—Laurie, whose sweetheart loved another . . . and Garth, whose girl had married another man.

AS THE buckboard rolled away from the group of young people who had attended the wedding, a shout of laughter rang happily in the gathering twilight. Ed and Paula were unaware that a "Just Married" sign hung on the back of their vehicle.

The girl in the poke bonnet lined with pink satin and her tall, range-browned companion did not add their hilarity to the laughing group. Laurie Brent and Garth Douglas just looked at each other and smiled cynically.

"There goes our ex-loves," Garth said in a low voice, the muscles hardened in his lean, young jaw.

"Is it entirely ex-love?" Laurie asked, her dark eyes a little too bright under her pink-lined bonnet.

"No. You and I understand each other, don't we, Laurie?"

His gray eyes clung with understanding to that sparkle of moist brightness under her long lashes.

They did know each other, these two who had eased their heartbreak by exchanging confidences. Garth knew that Laurie had been wearing Ed Gimbell's ring on a ribbon under her tight little bodice when Paula had come from Denver to keep books for her uncle, who was building the new railroad.

Paula herself had told Laurie that her main reason for coming to Gulch City was that tall, good-looking young cowpoke, Garth Douglas. Before Garth had come here to work for the Lazy D outfit, he had driven the Denver stage.

Paula and Garth, Laurie and Ed. All last winter they had paired off like that for sleigh rides and taffy pulls and box suppers. Now it was spring, and the world was all topsy-turvy for these two who watched their former sweethearts drive away on their honeymoon.

"You can't force love—or stop it," Garth said, looking gloomily at the buckboard as it dipped down on the other side of the rise.

Laurie was looking at the buckboard, too. Ed's arm would be around his bride, her curly blonde head cuddled on his shoulder. They would be talking about the suite of rooms Ed had leased in Gulch City Hotel, where they would live while Ed built the railroad bridge across Paradise Canyon.

"Take me home, Garth!" Laurie sobbed.

"I was about to suggest that myself. I've got to get an early start in the morning."

Garth was pulling out of this country. Tomorrow he would start for St. Louis, where he would meet the man who was going to give him a choice job in a new overland freight company.

"It will take me just a few moments to change to jeans," Laurie said. A good cow hand like me can't wear pink ruffles long."

"I like you better in jeans, Laurie."

"Ed didn't," she mumbled, a catch in her voice.

By the time Garth had untied their horses and brought them to the front of the house where Ed and Paula had been married, Laurie came out, slim and boyish in her tight riding trousers.

The wedding guests still lingering in the yard turned their light-hearted nonsense on them.

"Don't you two stay out too late watching the moonlight in Paradise Canyon."

Laurie felt a lift of satisfaction. At least, none of them suspected that both she and Garth were downhearted. Some of the sting of being jilted was eased if others didn't know.

♥ ♥ ♥

By Sophie Ellis

Laurie said: "Don't! You're making fun of love."

Garth drawled, "They've been tryin' to hatch up a romance between us ever since the weddin' was announced."

Laurie laughed without embarrassment as she swung into the saddle. "They don't know how completely cured we are of love," she said.

"I reckon I'm through with women." Garth's voice was as cold and still as the North Star. "When I go on the freighting job, I won't see a woman for months at a time."

"I'll miss you, Garth," she said with frank friendliness.

"Thanks, pal."

THEY jogged along without speaking, each busy with gloomy thoughts. The trail climbed toward the mountains. A blood-red moon shouldered up between the high walls of Paradise Canyon. Against its ruddy face was silhouetted the skeleton of the railroad bridge that Gimbell was building across the canyon.

Laurie frowned as she looked at that bridge. Some of the settlers hadn't wanted the railroad to span Paradise Canyon with its thunderous roadway of steel.

At the point where the bridge was being built, Paradise Canyon forked, sending a short, narrow, high-walled prong into a lovely hidden valley teeming with all kinds of game and fur-bearing animals. Nowhere in the West was hunting and trapping better than in beautiful Paradise Hole.

"There won't be much game here after the trains start shrieking above the Hole," Laurie said sadly.

Garth stared at the unfinished bridge. "There's goin' to be trouble with the trappers," he said. "They're organizin' now."

"You mean they might try to attack the construction gang or do something to the bridge?"

"Yes. The railroad could bridge Western Fork and leave Paradise Hole alone."

Laurie sighed. "Tourists and nesters will come to Paradise Hole and complete its ruin."

"That's right. Paradise Hole should be kept for the wild creatures."

There was a pact among the settlers to conserve the wild life of the Hole. No rancher claimed the right to use the rich winter pasture that could be had here.

Garth said, "With the moon as bright as a chunk of sunshine, the lake in the Hole is going to be pretty tonight."

"A nice place for jilted lovers to talk over their troubles." She laughed. "Let's take a short ride there."

They rode under the half-finished bridge and entered Paradise Hole through the narrow pass between stupendous walls. The moon's giant silver disc poured silver magic on a haunting vista of lake and flower-studded meadows fringed with trees.

As they followed the clean trail by the lake, their horses stepped quietly, as though they, too, were a little bemused with the unearthly beauty.

"Let's sit on that boulder for a few minutes," Garth said.

"Perfect!"

Laurie was off her horse immediately, running toward the flat-topped rock at the water's edge. Last autumn she had come here with Ed. They had sat on this very boulder. Suddenly her heart seemed as heavy and cold as the rock. Garth was so quiet beside her that she wondered if the spot had memories for him. Paula had liked to ride. Laurie and Garth stood there.

Something splashed in the water, making an arrow-shaped path on the moonlighted surface.

"Beaver," said Garth. "There's a dam at the other end of the lake."

Laurie removed her hat and let the breeze blow through her dark, curly hair. Her face, lifted to the still radiance of the sky, was beautiful. She knew Garth was looking at her, maybe feeling sorry for her. Tonight he must feel exactly as she did—all hollow and aching inside, with the blood turned into tears that would never be shed because one had to be proud.

She turned toward him. In the moonlight, he looked hurt and bitter and young.

"Poor Garth—and poor me!" she said, reaching out to put a companionable hand over his.

But as their hands touched, she sobbed out loud.

"Well, I'll be blamed!" he said, leaning over her. "Here! I have a handkerchief. Put a big cry into it and get it out of your system."

She took the large, clean white square that smelled of good tobacco and buried her face in it.

Garth put his arm across her shoulder. "That's enough, Laurie!"

Gently he drew the handkerchief from her and wiped her eyes, tilting up her pointed face.

"Blow!" he said, holding it against her nose.

She giggled and sobbed, while his big gentle hands dried away the last dampness from her eyes and face. His arm still lay across her shoulder in a comforting, companionable way.

"Now, let's look at this sensibly," he said. "There isn't much to bein' in love, after all. Half of it is only in the mind. Why, Laurie, even a kiss is nothin' but two pair o' lips touching each other. That's all. Look."

BEFORE she could stop him, he swept her close and his lips brushed hers. The first contact was as light and cool as the moonlight on the water, as passionless as two leaves coming together in the wind. Suddenly she sensed a new urgency in him. The hard strength of his young arms became a vital force that entered her own pulsing nerves. Her lips under his warmed, clung responsively with the ecstasy that flooded her.

At last he lifted his face from hers.

"Laurie!" he whispered hoarsely, staring down at the beautiful, dreamy face still cradled on his arm.

Her red lips, still blooming with his kiss, were parted, her dark eyes shining with two points of moonlight that had probed the long lashes.

"Oh, Laurie!" he repeated, sweeping her hungrily to him again.

Before he could repeat the kiss, reason returned to her. She held up a restraining hand, placed a finger on his lips to silence him.

"Don't!" she panted, her face white in the moonlight. "You're just making fun of love." She broke from his arms. They both sat down on the rock.

He did not answer, but continued to look at her with darkened gray eyes that burned with two bright glints. When he spoke at last, his voice was rough.

"I'm sorry. I forgot how sweet and warm and beautiful you are. Ready to go?"

He pulled his long, muscular length from the rock hurriedly, as though he were suddenly afraid of her.

She followed him silently toward their horses that grazed on the lush grass. All of her senses were acutely alive. A frog croaked lazily at the lake's edge. The night wind brought the scent of blossoms.

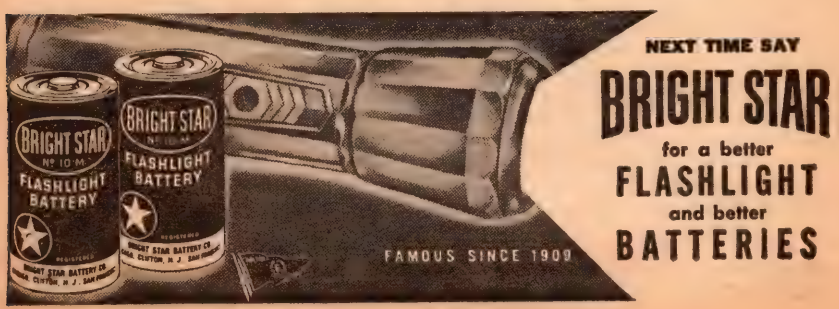
Deliberately she turned her eyes from the broad shoulders in front of her. *I'm not going to get all mixed up because he kissed me.* She forced herself to remember how Ed had moved her if even his little finger brushed her hand.

"I'll never come to Paradise Hole again with a man," she vowed.

She was looking at the pass. She saw the sudden geyser of fire and rocks that hurtled upward. Then an ear-shattering explosion shook the earth. She felt the force strike her body. When she recovered her senses, she was lying in a clump of bushes.

"Garth!" she cried out.

"You're all right?" he gasped, staggering up from his prone position



"What was that, Garth?"

"The bridge has been blown up. Look."

A red glare still hung over the pass. In the ruddy light, augmented by moonlight, it was plain to see that not only the bridge had been blown up, but part of the canyon wall.

"The pass has been closed, Garth!" she cried.

He came closer, looking down at her. "Steady, Laurie. Don't lose your nerve."

"But how are we going to get out of here tonight?"

He put his hand on her shoulder. The large palm felt capable and singularly gentle.

"I guess we won't get out of here tonight. We'd better not go near the pass until daylight. There'll be loose boulders and rock slides."

"We'll have to stay here—all night?"

"It's warm down here in the Hole," he said calmly. "Let's build a campfire and take it easy."

After a moment she said flatly, "The horses have run off."

"Yep." He had started to gather dry sticks for the fire. "I reckon we'll find them in the morning."

The fire had begun to flare brightly before she spoke again.

"There's a trapper's shack not far from here. It used to be stocked with food and supplies."

"That means we'll have some breakfast," Garth grinned at her cheerfully over the blaze he was fanning with his broad hat. "I'll need a good breakfast. Because when we're get out of here, I'll have to put spurs to my horse to try to catch the stage."

"That's right," she said. "You'll miss your job if you don't get the stage."

"But consider how lucky we are, Laurie. Suppose we'd been under the bridge or even near it when it blew up?"

She shuddered and came to sit by the fire that now crackled cozily. Garth was gathering dried grass and leaves now. He made two piles, one on each side of the fire.

"Cuddle down over there until daylight," he said, handing her his pistol.

"But don't you want to keep your gun in case there're wolves or mountain lions here?"

"You keep it." His sudden laugh was deep. "This moonlight might make me want to kiss you. If I try it again, just draw your gun."

LAURIE was glad that the darkness covered her furious flush. Without answering him, she curled up on her leaves. But she couldn't sleep. The frequent rustle on his side of the fire told her that he, too, was awake.

She lay looking at the climbing moon. It was nearly overhead now. Its bleached light felt almost fluid against her skin. The hidden night life went on about her. Baby quail cheeped sleepily in the underbrush. Once a deer came down to the water's edge to drink. Her breath rushed happily from her nostrils.

"It's lovely here," she acknowledged to herself.

Now she knew why the trappers wanted to keep it unspoiled forever. It would be possible to live here indefinitely, cut off from the outside world. There was food and fuel and shelter. With the right companion to share all this beauty, there would be also happiness.

She tried to picture how it would be if she had been trapped here with Ed. But the vision would not come clear for her. Always Garth's strong-jawed face intruded.

At last the cool, flower-scented breeze curling through the warmth of the fire soothed her into drowsiness. . . .

Her eyes opened on a magnificent sunrise that painted the sky above the snow-crowned mountain walls. She sat up and looked across the smouldering embers of the campfire.

Garth's pile of leaves showed only the imprint of his long body.

She went to the water's edge to wash her face. On a log jutting out into the lake Garth sat fishing with a length of creeper fastened to a slender pole.

"Mornin', lazy bones," he greeted. "Better be makin' the biscuits. I've caught us a mess o' fish."

"Biscuits!" she jeered, walking toward him. "Want me to make them out of mud?"

"No, Ma'am. Just mosey over to the cabin a jog or two down the lake and stir up some of the flour and lard you'll find. Fire's already built in the chimney, and the kettle's singin' on the crane by now."

"You talk like we're having a picnic," she said, noting the healthy tinge of color in his ears and brown cheeks.

"Might as well make the best of it." He lifted a flapping fish from the water. "I've been down to where the bridge blew up. We might have to figure out a way to escape."

"You're actually telling me the pass is filled up?" Her face was suddenly blanched.

"There isn't any more pass." He baited the hook with another worm. "The explosion caused a rock slide that even an antelope couldn't climb. We're walled in. Completely."

She walked slowly away from him, a queer, dead feeling inside. *Suppose they could never get away?* Thinking about it last night had been only amusing. Now it might be stark reality. Her alarmed eyes swept around Paradise Hole. The name was perfect. Every step she took revealed berries, wild fruits, edible roots, and game.

Squirrels raced in the trees. Quail ran before her. A baby fawn peered at her unafraid from behind a bush. As long as Garth had ammunition for his pistols, he could shoot game. Then snares could be made.

But ringed about were those sullen mountain walls, sweeping almost straight up, until their ragged peaks touched the clouds. It was a heavenly prison, but nevertheless really a prison from which there might be no escape.

When she caught her first glimpse of the cabin, her breath stopped. It was almost too picturesque to be real. The south side of the log walls was covered with morning glory vines blooming a month sooner than they could beyond this sheltered spot. Smoke curled up from the stone chimney that almost filled the north side. On the roof of the little porch a robin sang ecstatically.

Inside, the one room provided a tier of bunks from floor to rafters. Shelves were filled with provisions, traps, fishing gear, and tools. By the fireplace hung rude cooking utensils.

Soon she was making biscuits on the rough plank table. When Garth came in with the cleaned fish, the iron skillet, filled with grease, was ready.

"Smells like home," he said. "And I'm hungry as a bear."

After the last crisp, brown fish and fluffy biscuit had been washed down with strong black coffee, Garth acknowledged that he hadn't eaten as much in months.

"Don't bother with cleaning up," he said. "Let's go for a ride."

"You found the horses?"

He nodded. "They're grazin' right by a cow and her calf."

Laurie's delighted dimple flashed in her cheek. "We'll even have milk and butter."

Garth's eyes lingered on the dimple. "Found a nest o' prairie chicken eggs, too. And there's a bee tree not far from here."

Color ran softly from dimple to dancing dark eyes. "It would be fun if we were sure we could get out in a day or two."

Garth rolled a cigarette in his long brown fingers and licked it carefully before answering.

"We'll ride over to the pass. I want you to get a closeup view of what the explosion did."

Long before they came close to the place where the pass once had bisected the mountain walls, she saw that Garth had not exaggerated the truth when he had told her that an antelope could not climb the rock slide.

A hundred feet up, the slide had formed

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a wide shelf that overhung the valley. Still higher, while they stood staring in consternation, a giant boulder slipped and crashed to the ground with a force like a small earthquake.

"We'll never get out that way," Laurie said flatly.

Garth nodded. "Let's keep ridin' and take a closeup look at the mountains."

ALL morning they rode, sometimes lost in enjoyment of the panorama of lake, green glades, trees feathered in young leaves, and the sweep of mountain walls that touched the clouds.

Garth's gray eyes had a worried look, and he seldom spoke. Even when they stopped to eat the luscious strawberries growing in a sunny dell, he did not seem to be aware of her.

When they had finished their strawberry lunch, he said, "I reckon we'd better turn back. We're not doing any good at this end of the Hole. I want another look at the pass."

Laurie felt the warm color rush into her cheeks. *He doesn't want to spend another night here alone with me,* she thought.

Gossip would wag its tongue about them if they ever escaped. He would feel obliged to ask her to marry him. Her head went up proudly.

That was the exact moment the inspiration came to her.

"Garth!" she exclaimed eagerly. "We're two stupids! The trappers would not have blown up the bridge and filled in the pass unless they knew there was another way to get into Paradise Hole."

"Well, I'll be branded for a fool!" he acknowledged. At last he seemed to see her. His gray eyes lingered with admiration on her flushed cheeks and curved lips. "Let's start lookin' for a cave. The secret pass probably will be a cave."

"A cave that will go right through the mountains." She held out her hand for him to help her up from her sitting position on the grass.

His long fingers closed around hers and drew her to her feet. He put his hands on her shoulders and smiled.

"You're a smart one, Laurie."

His touch was like fire on her flesh. Her breath sounded so loud and fast to her own ears that she was dismayed. *He mustn't know.* But he did know. A muscle quivered in his brown jaw, and his hands dropped from her shoulders. Then he swung toward his horse.

She spoke to cover her feeling for this man who would go out of her life forever after they were free.

"The pass ought to be near the cabin. It's the logical point."

He nodded. "We'll hunt first on the curve around that end of the lake."

And that was exactly where they found the cave.

Laurie saw it first. She drew her horse to a stop and pointed.

"Look, Garth! See that hole in the mountain above the rock shelf? There's a rope ladder hanging from the shelf to the ground."

"That's it," Garth acknowledged.

They were almost under the ladder now. The shelf was sixty feet high, and looked a hundred to the girl peering up at the frail ladder swaying in the wind.

"I'll go up first and look around," Garth offered.

She watched his long, graceful legs climb the ladder. It seemed easy enough. When he reached the top, he grinned down at her before turning to explore the low cave. He was gone for several minutes. Returning to the edge of the shelf, he swung over and came down.

"It's the trappers' secret pass," he declared. "And there's plenty of evidence that it is used often."

"But how will we ever get the horses out?"

"We probably won't. They'll have to stay here and grow fat and lazy."

Laurie measured the height of the ladder with her eyes. Then she noted the sun swinging low in the west.

"We won't try it tonight," Garth said. "There's no telling how long it will take to go through the cave, except that the lead-rope up there seems to indicate we'll have to go through a dark maze."

"Then we'll have to spend another night here?" she asked, avoiding his eyes.

"It won't be any worse than last night. Let's rustle up some supper."

While Laurie mixed corn bread, using the prairie chicken eggs, Garth opened a can of beans and made the coffee.

After supper they sat on the log by the lake, fishing for their breakfast—the last meal they would have here.

It's almost like being on a honeymoon, Laurie thought shyly.

More than once in the past she had pictured herself as Ed Gimbell's wife. Goodness knows she had been infatuated with him enough for that! But never had she experienced the peace—the completeness of life that she felt now after these few hours alone with Garth.

"I must have been loving him all long without knowing it," she decided.

If he went away, she would never see him again. Despair closed suddenly over her.

Garth, too, was busy with his thoughts, until something distracted him. "Listen!" he said. "I thought I heard a shout." He faced toward the lake.

From over the lake came a thin "Yoo-hoo!"

Instantly Garth cupped his mouth in his hands and answered. The faraway voice came again, but this time the call was "Laurie!"

She knew she should reply, but she remained huddled on the log. This was the end of the sweetest dream she had ever experienced. Her throat felt suddenly hard and dry.

"They've come through the trapper's pass lookin' for us," Garth said, letting his fishing pole sag to the log.

"We can get out tonight," Laurie said. "Whoever is coming for us will have horses on the other side. You—you can start for your job early tomorrow."

His eyes probing her face were without their accustomed laughter.

"It's been like a lifetime squeezed into twenty-four hours, hasn't it, Laurie? We've faced danger together. We've made this mountain-locked prison furnish us food and lodging. And—I've kissed you."

You kissed me when I cried. I was crying for another man—but now I can cry for you.

She sobbed, looking at him with brimming dark eyes.

"Do you—have a handkerchief, Garth?" she choked, smiling through her tears.

"Laurie!"

He snatched her into his arms. Their lips merged, once more making them whole and perfect in a shared moment of ecstasy. The blue lake water slapped gently against their log.

"We'll spend our honeymoon here in the Hole," he whispered.

Feet were crashing through the underbrush. He picked up his fishing pole and tried to look careless. A moment later he spoke again.

"Here comes your Pa. And, by golly! That Ed Gimbell is with them."

She reached out her hand to him, letting her heart smile at him through her eyes. She couldn't find the right words to tell him that Ed was only an unimportant person in her past. But what she said was completely satisfactory:

"I love you, Garth."

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♥ ♥ NEVER LOVE

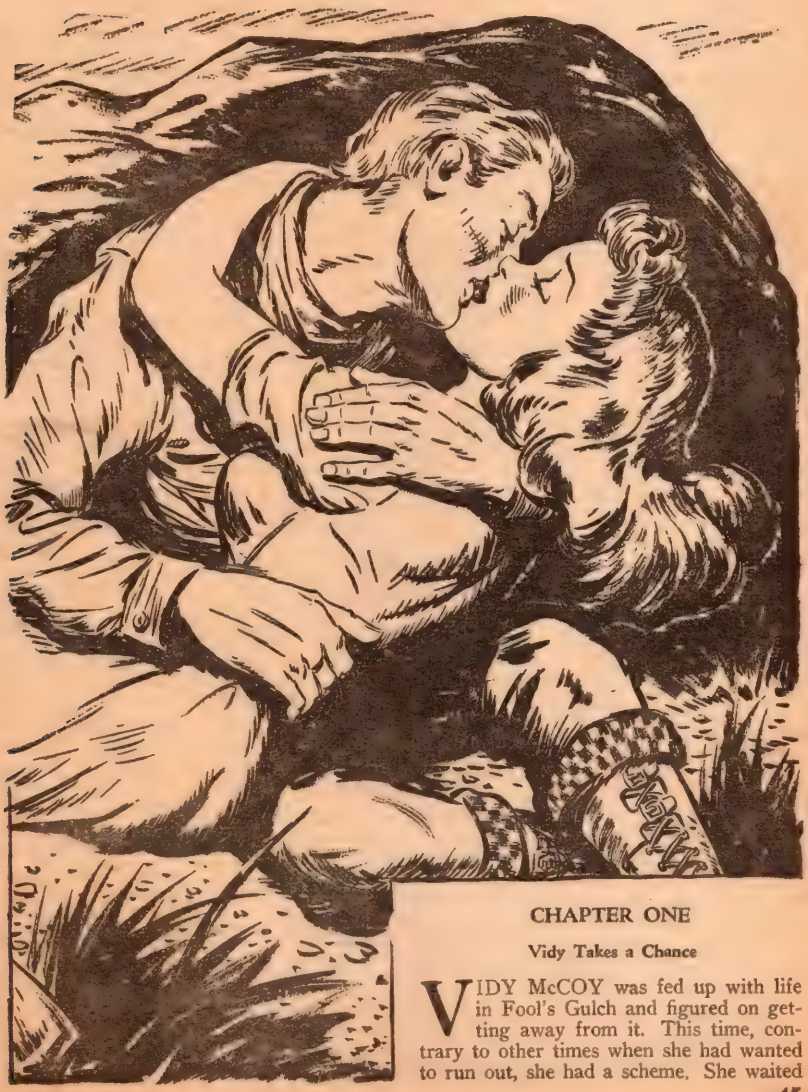
Rollicking Romance Novelette

They didn't hear the gunfire—or the bullets chipping the boulder.

By Art Lawson

Because she was a fugitive, Vidy couldn't take handsome Bart's kisses —but she was determined that catty Yolanda wouldn't get them either.

A FUGITIVE GAL!



CHAPTER ONE

Vidy Takes a Chance

VIDY McCOY was fed up with life in Fool's Gulch and figured on getting away from it. This time, contrary to other times when she had wanted to run out, she had a scheme. She waited

until she thought the time was ripe for suggesting it to her father.

"Pa," she said, "I'm figurin' on goin' down to Oro City to run a boarding house."

Pa cleaned his glasses. He reckoned that Vidy was the only person in the world who called him that. Everyone else called him "Beard." Beard McCoy they would tell you was the unluckiest prospector in the mountains. But Beard had a different story.

"You ain't goin' to do any such thing," he said. "This summer I'm goin' to strike it rich."

"This summer I'm goin' to shrivel up and blow away," Vidy said emphatically. "And when you come back from scratchin' around the hills you're goin' to wonder how that ol' tumbleweed got into the cabin. But it isn't goin' to be a tumbleweed. It's goin' to be what's left of me."

Beard McCoy slowly shook his head. His gray, curly beard waggled, too. The boys liked to rib him about the beard. They told him if he would pan it he'd strike a damn-site richer claim than he would ever find up in those mountains. Or they offered to buy it to stuff a mattress. Or if he would cut it up into small pieces, leavin' a little bit of hide, he could peddle it to tourists down in Denver as genuine Apache scalps.

But none of these things bothered Beard McCoy as much as his daughter's insistence that she was going to leave Fool's Gulch. It was for Vidy that Beard prospected about these mountains. It was for Vidy's ma that he had grown that extraordinary adornment that had given him a name and a certain distinction in this country.

Vidy's ma had sort of worked him into that beard. He liked to tell about it, even to Vidy who had heard it plenty of times before.

"Your ma used to talk that way," he said. "But what come of her—she got killed by a runaway horse down in Denver when we was tryin' to live what she called a proper life. And what'll happen to you? A city slicker or something down to Oro City will—"

"Pa—Oro City has only one hundred and three population, barrin' births in the last month, if any, and there ain't any city slickers there." Her head nodded vigorously.

She had started out convincingly enough, but ended rather weakly. Vidy was in the habit of telling the truth; and there was one city slicker in Oro City. He had come in with the mail carrier just before Vidy's last visit to town. He was a geologist, a sort of scientific prospector who could figure out what was under the ground by looking it up in a book.

Vidy pretended that he didn't count and that she did not even know his name—Bart Jerome. But it stuck in her mind like part of an old song—a favorite song.

"Well—" her father gave in slightly—"I'll tell you what. It's about time I was getting another grubstake and settin' out. Maybe you could stay with the Wallaces till I get back."

"I don't want to stay with the Wallaces," Vidy insisted. "I can support myself fine with a little boarding house. You won't have to worry about me while you're digging up the hills."

Beard eyed his daughter shrewdly. She was a mighty pretty girl. She even had distinction of a sort for a girl who had grown up on the bitter edge of poverty, in mining camps and in this desolate Fool's Gulch. She had educated herself with books and magazines she had picked up in deserted shanties.

And when she walked it was as if she were a queen. She deserved a break of some kind, he reckoned—even if it was obvious that she had one eye at least on that damn fool college boy, Bart Jerome. Beard sighed very deeply.

"Your ma said I'd have a beard to my knees before I found my strike," he said sadly. "And I got mad at her. It was the only time I ever got mad at your ma, Vidy, and I swore I'd be damned if 'd shave again until I was a millionaire. It was that year she got killed." His voice was hoarse. "You agree to stay at Wallace's," he ended, "and I'll let you go to town."

"Okay," she said.

Wallace's was better than nothing. . . .

Vidy had only two dresses to her name, a couple of pots, some silver spoons that had been her grandmother's, and a box full of raggedy books. But moving down to Oro City from Fool's Gulch was no easy job. First of all she had to catch Washington Irving, the cat.

She had not seen him around lately so went out to whistle for him and Phoebe, their hound dog, came trotting up instead. Phoebe lolled her red tongue. She looked up at Vidy with sad expectancy. She rubbed against Vidy's leg, then licked her knee.

"You seen Washington Irving, Phoebe?" Vidy asked.

Phoebe stopped wagging her tail and sulked. She stayed there as if she was going to dig a hole for herself and never move. Phoebe was so jealous of Washington Irving Vidy had more than once thought Phoebe would eat the cat. Even now she was not sure that Phoebe had not as she went up the gulch calling. She went up a couple hundred yards to where the little stream came tinkling down over a fall

This was her favorite spot in Fool's Gulch, and the only thing not foolish about it. This fall splashed into a nice round pool where she could sit on a hot day and dream with never a worry of being disturbed. There would be nothing like this down in Oro City.

She tested the water with her foot, then glanced up suddenly when a couple pebbles scattered down from the edge of the fall. She could see nothing there, nor were any more pebbles falling. Her cat must have been playing with her. He liked to chase pebbles when there were no rats or mice around.

"Washington Irving," she said, "come down from there."

A MAN laughed. Her heart went *bang*. It seemed to stand on end. Then it began to thump like an ore crusher. There was only one man in the world, she figured, who could laugh like that. Then he poked his edge over the shelf that ran clear across the gulch and Vidy knew that her desires had betrayed her. It was not that geologist at all.

It was Lucky Lucas, a prospector she knew very well, an hombre she would just as soon climbed on over Sawatch Range and did not stop until his toes were in the Pacific. She had nothing against Lucky Lucas. She just had nothing for him.

"This Irving hombre your new beau?" he asked, grinning.

"Washington Irving is a writer," she said archly. "When I named that cat he was my favorite writer. But he isn't now."

"Washington Irving's a writer and a cat," he said, "what else?"

"Only my black cat at the moment," she said in that same stiff voice. "You seen a black cat, Mister Lucky Lucas?"

"I sure have," he said, "stalkin' a camp robber just up the gulch."

A camp robber was a kind of bird, a sort of jay. She could hear it screeching be-

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yond the gentler tinkling of the little fall.

"He's wasting his time," she said. "He never caught one yet. They're too smart for him."

She started to climb up to the ledge. Lucky Lucas gallantly gave her a hand. Not thinking one way or the other about it she took it and he lifted her clear up over the edge. He was stronger than an ox, big and powerful and even good looking, she noticed, with his waxed dark mustache and rather heavy black eyebrows. She smiled her thanks.

But Lucky Lucas did not let go of her. It is quite possible that he thought the smile was an invitation. Or maybe he had been dreaming about her as she had been dreaming about the geologist. If you are lonely enough you can dream yourself into believing just about anything. And Lucky Lucas had been prospecting up here for a long time.

"God, Vidy," he said, "I been needing you like a drownin' man needs a helping hand. Let's go down to Oro, Vidy, and—"

"But you're always saying you're going to marry Yolanda Wallace," Vidy protested.

"The heck with her," Lucky Lucas said. "You're my girl from now on. Yolanda don't mean nothing to me."

Vidy tried to get away. She pushed against him with her knee and struggled frantically for a moment. But he was too powerful for her. He bent her up against him and kissed her on the lips, kissing her so hard he bruised her.

She cried out under the pain and in the struggle he slipped on the gravel that had been loosened by any number of placer miners who had passed this way in the old days when there was gold in the mountains. He fell back, still clinging to her. Somehow her hand touched a rock. She slammed it against him, beat him with it. She hit him on the head with this rock and he went lax.

She disentangled herself. Her knees had become lacerated on the gravel, but she hardly noticed it. There was blood on the man's head, and bits of matted hair and blood on the rock. She felt of his pulse, but her horror was so great she did not know if he still lived. He did not seem to be breathing at all. He was completely limp and motionless.

Blindly she flung the rock from her. A black little streak came from some hidden crevice in the canyon to play with that stone. It was Washington Irving. Terrified, the girl caught him and fled.

Her father was too preoccupied with his plans of making a fortune to notice the girl's agitation; and Vidy was still too stunned by what she had done to mention the meeting with Lucky Lucas up there by the waterfall. She was in such a state of complete panic all she could think of was flight. She had to get away from Fool's Gulch—and in a hurry—and as far away as possible.

Frantically she loaded her books and carpet bags on Catherine while Beard lashed down his mining equipment on the gray, sturdy back of Pearley. In a very short while they were ready to leave this place that had been their home for so long. Ordinarily Vidy might have dallied a bit to look once more on the rather comfortable little home she had made here in the gulch.

She might have had some pang at leaving the cabin. But the picture of Lucky Lucas stretched out up there above the waterfall brought the awful terror back to her heart and drove her on relentlessly. She could not even whistle for Phoebe when they were finally ready to leave. She puckered her lips but no sound came.

Beard had to whistle for the hound. Then they turned their backs on their old home and Vidy lifted Washington Irving up to ride on the pack of one of the burros. Without a backward look she trudged along down the gulch beside her father while the burros tagged slowly along.

"Yessir," her father was saying. "I mean, yes, ma'am. Come snowfly I'm agoin' to shave off this here beard. I'm agoin' to buy you a silk dress and genuine store shoes. I'm agoin' to get drunk. Come snowfly I'll be a rich man."

Vidy shuddered. Come snowfly, she reckoned, she would be hanged for murder.

CHAPTER TWO

Never Alone Again

THEY made a dicker with Grub Stake Wallace. In exchange for a certain amount of work around the store Vidy would be given food and lodging, a daily bone for Phoebe, and two bucks a week.

For a grubstake to last until winter old Beard McCoy would promise to share fifty-fifty in any strike he made. For hunting mice and packrats Washington Irving could keep whatever he could catch.

It seemed like a pretty good dicker all around. To Vidy it seemed wonderful. She could do tremendous things with two bucks a week. Maybe she could even buy a horse and get away from these parts before the body was found up Fool's Gulch.

There was one thing, though, that did not please her at all. That was old Grub Stake's daughter, Yolanda, who had gone to school in Denver and had ever since that time put on airs. Yolanda was a lady. Yolanda said "agayne," drawing it out, and called the old jug in which she kept wild flowers a "vawzz."

"I'm so glad to see you agayne," she said to Vidy, and she made her beautiful brown eyes very wide and round.

"What's the matter?" Vidy asked. "You gettin' near-sighted."

Yolanda blinked. "Of course not," she said. "I brought you this little vawzz of flowers to keep on your dressing table. Don't you think they are lovely?"

"Precious," Vidy said.

They were up in Vidy's room now on the second floor of the store getting her organized. Yolanda had come, ostensibly to help, but more probably to snoop, Vidy thought, and to check up on Vidy's poor possessions. Nevertheless Yolanda was making the change from gulch home to town a little more pleasant than Vidy had expected. Those flowers did brighten up the place even though Vidy was sure Yolanda had brought them so she could use her fancy word for jug.

Yolanda rearranged the flowers, treating them with much delicacy. Then she moved across the room to sit in a small Boston rocker and watch Vidy putting away her books in a case built of a couple packing boxes Grub Stake had given her. Vidy took as long as possible with this so she would not have to open her carpet bag while Yolanda was in the room.

But Yolanda apparently had no intention of leaving. Finally Vidy could not stall any longer so she flung herself down on the bed on her back with her hands under her head. Her glossy black hair was a soft and lovely cushion, and the easy-flowing waves complemented her short nose and round chin and widely curving mouth. Vidy was a very beautiful girl, and suddenly Yolanda must have learned the fact. Yolanda rocked her chair with some violence.

"Am I worn out?" Vidy said. She did not look around at the store-keeper's daughter. "Packing—unpacking—coming down from the Gulch. Am I exhausted?"

Yolanda stopped rocking her chair. She got out of it, clicking her heels on the creaky board floor.

"You must have crawled down," she said sharply, and Vidy thought her anger was caused by the fact that she did not let Yolanda see what was in her carpet bag. "Judging by the condition of your knees, you *ought* to be tired." Yolanda wheeled away. Vidy sat up stiffly, staring at Yolanda. The brown eyes of the store-keeper's daughter were no longer big and round. They were narrowed, and her lips were thinned, too. "You better have a little beauty nap," Yolanda suggested. "I'll call you at five-thirty."

"Thanks," Vidy said, her voice choking as if she had eaten a dry cracker. Yolanda left, and Vidy pulled her short dress down over her legs. If Yolanda had noticed her scratched knees so quickly, would she soon guess that Vidy was a murderer? Vidy shuddered miserably. She reckoned she would have to make her get-away real soon.

Though Vidy was not supposed to work at all this day she could not stay alone in her room with her secret, so she washed up, changed to the longest of her two dresses, and went down to the store. Her father, Beard McCoy, was down there telling Grub Stake Wallace how he was going to make both of them rich men.

Beard was saying: "We'll be the richest men in the mountains. I know exactly where the strike is goin' to be located, too, though I ain't sayin' since walls have ears. But when I come back, Grub Stake—"

"Your beard will be two inches longer," Vidy cut in.

"Listen to that?" Beard said. "Ain't that an encouragin' daughter for you?"

"Now my daughter," Grub Stake said, "already thinks I'm the richest man in the mountains. She sent away to the mail order house for some little pink britchers with lace and stuff on them when everybody knows bleached sugar sacking is good

enough for anybody. Cost six dollars and ninety-five cents, not includin' postage."

"Imagine that," Beard said. "Six ninety-five. Now my daughter—" he stopped suddenly. Through his beard Vidy could see that he was blushing. So was she. She lowered her long lashes and looked away. Her father cleared his throat. "You know," he went on feebly, "I ain't put my mind to my daughter's britchers since she was two years old. For all I know—now, listen, Grub Stake—" Grub Stake Wallace was starting to laugh at Beard as the old-timer got more and more confused. "What I mean," Beard McCoy went on, "is we got to get busy collectin' this junk and stuff I'll need."

Vidy said quickly: "If I sort of collect the stuff, Mister Wallace, that'll sort of help me learn where it is."

"Why—if it ain't Vidy McCoy, herself," a voice said from the front of the store.

WHEN Vidy realized that this awful conversation had been overheard she wanted to duck behind the counter, but was never given a chance. The man moved up from where he had been standing silently looking out on the hot street. There were little crinkles at the corners of his eyes.

He was smiling with an easy friendliness as if he had not heard a word about the britchers of these old-timers' daughters. It was Bart Jerome, the man Vidy had dreamed about and pretended did not exist. It was the hombre who had caused her to think of moving to Oro City. Now her first official meeting with him had been spoiled. And, furthermore, she could no longer think of him as she had before that happening in the gulch. She had to put him behind her with the rest of her life.

"Hello, stranger," she said.

The man halted for a second, then came ahead, laughing.

"I guess I made a mistake," he said. "I thought we had met, but maybe I'm wrong. How about introducing us, Grub Stake?"

"Why—sure—" Grub Stake said. "This here gent, Vidy, is okay, even if he has a lot of fool notions about mining. Been around here six weeks already and ain't panned an ounce of dust yet. Miss Vidy McCoy, this here is Bart Jerome. He's so damned educated he says 'ain't' a-purpose just so everybody'll think he's as ignorant as they are."

"Pleased to meet you, Mister Jerome," Vidy said.

She averted her eyes and did not give him her hand as she might ordinarily have done. She wanted to cry. She wanted to crawl into a sack and hide. She wanted to do almost anything except stand here like an old stick insulting the man. She had planned so much on this meeting but now all she could do was turn him away.

Then Yolanda Wallace swept into the room. She wore a long, tight-waisted gown that touched the floor and gloves that reached clear up to her shoulders. Her bright hair was coiled on the top of her head, and her eyes were round and soft.

"Why, what a surprise, Bart," she said cheerfully. "Thought you were resting, Vidy. Was just going out for a walk, father, in the cool of the evening."

She turned her big eyes on Bart Jerome in invitation, and because Bart was a gentleman he had to accept. He tipped his hat to Yolanda, a thing Vidy noticed he had not done to her.

"I would be honored—" he said.

Yolanda took his arm and giggled. "That's so nice of you, Bart," she said.

Bart Jerome looked something like a fish in a net, but he took Yolanda's arm and led her out of the store onto a dusty street that was very hot despite Yolanda's poetic comment. Behind them old Grub Stake sighed deeply.

"You *better* strike it rich, Beard," he said. "And not just for pink britchers, neither."

Very stiffly Vidy said: "We better start gathering your stuff, Pa."

Beard McCoy bought the usual stuff: beans, bacon, flour, sugar, coffee and dynamite. He took a sack of corn and oats, too, and a bottle of whiskey. These were for the day when he discovered his strike. The corn and oats were for Catherine and Pearley. The whiskey was unassigned.

At least Beard never announced what he was going to do with it, but he reckoned he would find a good use for the stuff when the time came, and though he had not yet made a strike he had never brought back either the grain or the bottle. After all, he said, a feller as well as a couple of lady

jackasses needs some consolation at times.

They got everything ready for pre-dawn packing, with Vidy pretending carefully to study the shelves so she would know where things were tomorrow when she was supposed to start work. Then they ate supper which Vidy cooked because Yolanda was still strolling in the cool of the evening with the geologist when the time came to start the potatoes, and after that Yolanda was busy entertaining him because she had asked him to stay and dine with them.

Vidy served her father, Grub Stake, Bart Jerome and Yolanda at the big table in the kitchen lean-to behind the store but did not join them. She had overheard Yolanda mention to Bart Jerome that they felt very lucky to have Vidy to "do" for them. It made Vidy so blind angry she forgot her troubles for the moment and almost went after Yolanda with the big stirring spoon.

Instead, she smiled meekly and went about the chore she had taken upon herself.

There was no sense, she thought, of raising a ruckus now. It would be better to take it—and tonight she could sneak out without anyone being suspicious.

So she served supper and afterwards ate alone at the small table beside the old iron stove while the men organized their nightly poker game. She fed the cat, Washington Irving, who had not managed to catch any mice yet and was still strutting around the place as if he did not like it at all. She found a big bone and chunk of meat for the hound dog, Phoebe, and went to the back alley to whistle.

Phoebe came up morosely wagging her tail. She pretended to ignore the food, but Vidy knew the dog was ravenous and would gulp down the meat in one mouthful as soon as Vidy turned her back, and then would carry the bone under the store to a cool spot where she could gnaw on it in peace. Phoebe was still sore because Vidy had been hunting for Washington Irving that morning and had not taken her along.

Vidy patted the dog behind the head, then turned back to the store. As she did so the tall figure of a man came out of the doorway. He came just a step this way and stopped; and Vidy's heart stopped, too. Those broad shoulders and lean hips could belong to nobody but Bart Jerome.

"Evenin', Vidy," he said softly. "That was good eating. Mighty good."

"Thanks," Vidy said with hardly enough breath left in her lungs to make the words audible.

He came up another step and lifted his hands to her, to take her by the arms. He held her before him with hardly any pressure from his fingers. In the purple light of night she could see that he was not smiling; but the rest was a blur to her because her eyes would not focus and her heart had run away with such violence it shook her lovely little body to the soles of her bare feet.

"Vidy—" he said. He stopped, and it seemed to Vidy that his voice choked up, too.

For the first time in her life she consciously pulled a woman-trick on him. She swayed a little toward him, so her shoulders pressed against the palms of his hands and the line of her back arched. Her body was trembling.

She said, "Yes," leaving her lips parted when she finished the word, because she knew her mouth was lovely that way.

His head was moving toward her, and she was becoming faint, when a shadow crossed the door quite suddenly.

"Vidy McCoy!" Yolanda's voice had a rasp in it as she called. "You seen Vidy, Bart?"

Bart Jerome stiffened like a statue. Then he dropped his grip on one of Vidy's arms and swung away so the light shone in her face.

"Why—sure," Bart said. "Right here. Feedin' her dog."

"I thought I would help you with the dishes," Yolanda said sweetly. "I'll dry them."

"And me," Bart said, "I got to run down to the church for the preacher. We need another poker hand."

He went off as if a posse were after him. And Vidy went in through the door past a triumphant Yolanda. She would never know what that Bart Jerome had been about to say to her. She would never taste the sweetness of his kiss on her lips, because tonight she was going to run away, as far away as possible from Fool's Gulch and the horror by the waterfall, and she would never, never be alone again with Bart Jerome.

CHAPTER THREE

Girl Fight

VIDY clattered the dishes. Her pa was talking again to Grub Stake Wallace and the doctor who had come in to join the poker game. They had played a little three-handed round of showdown while waiting and Beard McCoy had taken it. Since Beard had dealt it as well, Doc jokingly suggested that he had a couple dozen spare aces hidden in his beard. No wonder he had won.

"Ain't only aces behind that beard," Beard said, "as you boys will see when I come down the trail with Catherine and Pearley swaybacked from totin' dust. I'll buy drinks for the whole town and pay the barber ten bucks to give me a shave. What's behind this beard is the luckiest hombre in the mountains."

"'Ceptin' for Lucky Lucas," the storekeeper said. "He's due in any day now with a million dollars. I grubstaked him, so half of it's mine, just like it's been the last nine times I grubstaked him."

The other two men laughed. It was common gossip that Lucky Lucas never found anything. But Lucky had a formula for doubling whatever he did find. Lucky had boasted openly and in private that when he struck his fortune he would marry up with Yolanda. He had begun this when Yolanda was only ten years old and had never once changed his tune.

But that was not what caused Vidy to drop and break the dish she was washing, though Yolanda apparently thought it was.

"*You* can have him," Yolanda said under her breath.

"I don't want *him*," Vidy McCoy answered.

She went on clattering the dishes. When everything was cleaned up she wanted to go away immediately but, following her plan, hung around a while so as not to create suspicion. Bart Jerome came back with the preacher and a man he introduced as Mister Max Morton who wanted a hand in the game.

Then they dealt around and started the serious business of poker. Vidy waited as long as she could stand it, then got up silently and started for the door that led

to the stairway. Old Grub Stake noticed this.

"While you're up," he suggested, "maybe you wouldn't mind passing the jug around. Under the sink."

" 'Course not," Vidy said.

She found the jug and glasses and filled each man's drink up to "when." She put a pitcher of water on the table. They all thanked her as she filled their drinks, but Bart's thanks seemed somehow special. Vidy guessed she was reading something into it. He lifted the glass.

"I propose a toast to the grand little lady who cooked our supper tonight."

"Gosh—" Vidy blushed.

The men drank, laughed and praised the fine eatin' food they had been served. Doc said if it was as good as that he would move his quarters. The stranger, Max Morton, said so would he, only tomorrow he was headin' up into the hills. But it was old Beard McCoy who had the payoff.

"Ain't nothin' special in that eatin'," he said. "Been eatin' as good for years. Now for real eatin', there's a place down to Denver—"

Vidy was standing there embarrassed by all the praise. Pa's comments eased her up somewhat. But Bart Jerome had gotten going on his subject.

"Just like you, Beard. Got this wonderful cook in your house and you never even notice her. Looking for a better eating place some place else," he said. "You know—" he tapped his glass on the table—"I wouldn't be surprised if Beard's fortune wasn't right there under his house up in Fool's Gulch."

Beard hawed at that.

"I panned that long ago and it was a hell of a job," he said. "Always running into a lot of heavy black sand. Clogs the sluice box—and there ain't any gold there, anyway."

Bart Jerome looked as if he had seen a vision.

"That—my friend—" he said slowly—"I'll bet you is lead carbonate—and lead carbonate sometimes runs up to four hundred dollars a ton in silver. I'll bet your mine is right there where I said it was. Under your shanty."

Beard massively shook his head. "You're only a tenderfoot in this country, youngster. And me, I'm an old timer. If that sand was worth anything I guess I would of known it a long time ago."

"Maybe," Bart Jerome said doubtfully. Then, as if to close the subject he said: "Whose deal?"

AS SOON as she could Vidy got away and went up to the room where she was supposed to spend her stay at Oro City. Yolanda followed her. When Vidy tried to get through her doorway ahead of Yolanda the blond girl stuck a foot in and then pushed after her guest.

It was not easy to read Yolanda's expression in the flickering candlelight, but she seemed more worried than angry to Vidy, and the self-confidence that had made her so arrogant today was giving away to an unsureness that was not at all typical of her.

"What's bitin' you?" Vidy asked.

Yolanda closed the door behind her. Her brown eyes glinted strangely.

"Maybe you don't know it," she said, "this being your first day down from the gulch—but Bart Jerome and me are getting married even though he doesn't know anything about mining."

"Congratulations," Vidy said.

Yolanda was working up a mad. "And I want you to quit flirting with him. See?"

"I don't see at all," Vidy said.

"That's all he could talk about while we were walking," Yolanda said. "How you looked at him from the corners of your big blue eyes—how you swished your dress around your knees at him." Yolanda was becoming very angry. "Then you made up that excuse to go outside so he would follow you." She was almost crying. "Now—you lay off!"

"Okay." Vidy shrugged. She could not remember carrying on in this fashion. Having him talk that way about her was only another hurt. And it was ridiculous to have Yolanda claim that she had enticed him to follow her when she was only looking for her dog. But she was angry, too, now, and she could not just lay down and take this from Yolanda. She remembered Bart's discussion about the carbonates in the gulch. "Tomorrow—" Vidy said slowly—"I'll go on back home to Fool's Gulch and you can rest easy. I don't want nothing to do with that old fool of a bookworm miner."

The effect on Yolanda was more violent

than Vidy had expected. Yolanda sprang across the room to grab Vidy by the shoulders and shake her violently.

"I thought you would," she cried squeekily. "You knew Bart was going up Fool's Gulch tomorrow to prospect for lead carbonate."

Vidy had only guessed that he might go, and while trying to get even with Yolanda had forgotten all about Lucky Lucas. Mention of the Gulch brought back that original terror, and then that fright turned into a fighting anger at the world that was treating her so badly—and Vidy's anger turned mostly on Yolanda who was pestering her in her tragedy.

She hauled off and punched Yolanda in the jaw. The blond girl screamed though she was not really hurt and tried to scratch Vidy's face. Vidy ducked. She jammed her bare heel into the middle of Yolanda's stomach to drive that girl gasping back to the wall. Then, because she had taken a double dose of trouble today, she swung her left hand to slap Yolanda smartingly on the other cheek.

For a moment they only stared at each other, Yolanda fighting for her breath, Vidy panting like a dog on a hot day. Hate had taken place of the flighty jealousy in Yolanda's eyes. As for Vidy, now that this had gone too far, she was sorry about it. After all, she was leaving, and it would get nobody anywhere by starting a feud with Yolanda before she sneaked out.

She whispered hoarsely: "Now—get out—I don't want your man."

But Yolanda had not had her chance to fight. She did not know how to do it in a straightforward manner. So her brown eyes became crafty as she regained her breath. She suddenly screamed again, and with a suddenness that astounded Vidy, Yolanda ripped her own dress away from one shoulder, scratched herself enough to show, and set to tearing the house apart with her wails.

Vidy thought Yolanda had gone crazy. But the racket the girl made brought a rush of men's heavy boots up the flimsy stairs to the door of Vidy's room. Someone crashed it open, and the men crowded the sill as Yolanda cowered away, screaming.

"She tried to murder me. She tried to kill me," Yolanda said over and over again.

Instead of arguing with Yolanda, Vidy slapped her again. Yolanda shut up. But with crimsoned cheeks and eyes that were wide with fear and the dress ripped off one white, rounded shoulder, Yolanda's appearance spoke more eloquently than words. Too late to do anything about it Vidy saw in the faces of the men the belief that she had wantonly attacked Yolanda.

She saw that these men were against her for slapping Yolanda. Then she walked away from them, over to her bed to sit down with her face in her hands. She was not crying. She was only sitting there in frustrated bitterness.

"Aren't you going to do anything to her?" Yolanda demanded.

"Such as what?" somebody said.

"She attacked me," Yolanda said. "Aren't you going to put her in jail?"

"Come on, Yolanda," Grub Stake Wallace said softly.

The men left silently with Yolanda still protesting.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tremendous—Wonderful!

THIS time Vidy could not take her books with her, or much of anything. She picked out one spare dress for its ruggedness rather than for its looks and rolled up a few special possessions in it: her grandma's silver spoons, a bit of cheap jewelry, a lucky nugget. She thought of the nugget and the kind of luck it had brought her and suddenly unwrapped the bundle and threw the bit of gold away. It skittered across the floor to come to rest in the far corner of the room where it gleamed in the candlelight like the eye of some evil animal. Vidy turned away so she would not have to look at it.

She wondered what Bart Jerome had been going to say to her down there in the darkness of the alley, and experienced a deep and poignant distress. But she had this one little thing to take with her.

He had held her by her arms and when she tried hard enough she could feel the pressure of his fingers again as if he was still with her. For a moment she just gave herself up to the pleasure of this strange little sensation—then grimly set about rolling up her bundle again.

She had it on her lap when somebody rapped on the door.

"It's your pa, Vidy," Beard McCoy said.

She quickly hid the bundle behind her. "Okay, Pa," she said.

He came in, quietly closing the door. He tugged at his long gray beard. His eyes were shifty.

"I'll be leavin' tomorrow before dawn, goin' up the gulch on the way to the hills. Goin' that way because this ge-ol-o-gist says my fortune lays that way. He's just a book-readin' fool, Vidy, but it ain't out of my way to humor him. He's goin' along."

"Luck—Pa," Vidy said.

"What I'm gettin' at," Pa said, "is that you're comin' with me. We can borrow a couple jackasses from somebody and lug them books and junk of yours back to the shanty."

Vidy had thought this all out. Vidy could not wait until tomorrow. She had to run away tonight. She wished she could tell Beard all about it, and that she could cry out her sorrow on his rugged chest. But Vidy's pa had always been very strict with her. No lyin' or stealin' or you get a lickin' and go to Hell besides, he had always said. And if you do lie or steal you got to come straight and admit it and say you're sorry. He had never said no murderin', but she reckoned it came under the same general head as the others. He was so strict he would see her hang if hanging was the punishment decided upon.

"Why—Pa—" she said—"thanks."

Beard's eyes narrowed. "You're hidin' somethin' from me, Daughter," he said. "What is it?" Vidy shivered miserably there on the bed. She kept her eyes down, and maybe the long dark lashes on the soft skin of her cheeks melted up some of the old man's puritanism. He said slowly, "Don't matter. In time you'll come around and tell me. Meanwhile I want you to know that whatever you done to Yolanda she likely had it coming to her—with her bold ways. The rest of the boys feel the same way." He made a little chuckle. "Reckon you were gettin' even for her sayin' you was 'doin' ' for them, huh?"

"I didn't think you heard her say that," Vidy said.

"I hear lots of things, an' see more," Beard said. "Well—be seein' yuh in the mornin'. An' if I can't borrow a jackass or two I'll send back for this stuff."

"Thanks, Pa, for everything," she said. "Seein' yuh."

Because this was the last time she would ever see him she wished she could throw her arms around him and kiss him right in the middle of his preposterous beard and cry until she was worn out. But Beard suspected too much already. She bit her lower lip. Beard McCoy opened the door. Washington Irving streaked in between his legs and jumped up to Vidy's lap. Then he saw the light glint on the lucky nugget and he ran over to play with it.

"What's that?" Beard asked.

"My lucky nugget," Vidy said quickly. "I must of dropped it."

She jumped up to retrieve it and the bundle she had made lay exposed on the bed. Beard must have seen it, but he only said:

"Lucky you found it."

Then he went away as quietly as he had come.

Vidy sat there for a long time in a great state of dismay. She was very angry with

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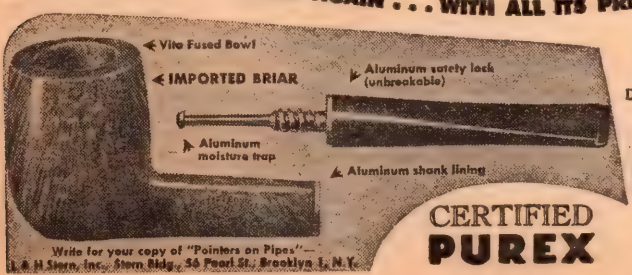

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Washington Irving. She knew her father had seen her bundle and she also knew that he had probably guessed what she had in her mind. She had heard him come back up again to the dormitory that was made up of the rear half of the second floor of the store building.

This was one big room with bunks on both sides where men stayed on the way through town to the diggings, or when they stayed in Oro City during the winter. She was sure that she recognized Beard's steady tread. A couple of other men went to bed in there, too, and one began snoring. Still she waited.

SHE blew out the candle and Washington Irving jumped up into her lap again where he settled down in a warm, snug ball and began to purr when she automatically scratched him behind the ears. What she should do was beat him, she thought, but after all he was only a poor dumb animal and had not meant to do wrong.

So she patted him gently, and she thought that she was really like the cat in a way. She did not like it here. She would not have liked it even if Yolanda Wallace were not here. She was home folks, that's all, and the gulch was her home the same as it was Washington Irving's. Even with the loneliness it was home and she had only kidded herself into thinking differently.

So Vidy sat in the darkness and made her plans. Tonight she would return to the gulch. If she had killed Lucky Lucas the only decent thing she could do was go back there and bury him decently. If he was by some chance still alive it was her duty to nurse him. She saw this very clearly now that the original panic had passed. She felt mean and despicable because she had run in the first place.

She decided she would take the cat back to the gulch, too, where it would be contented and happy.

So she waited until the store was quiet and, with the bundle and her shoes tucked under one arm and the cat held to her bosom, she cautiously opened the door of her room. She stopped to make sure that the door's squeak had not wakened anyone, but everything seemed to be normal.

The man who was shaking the dormitory with his snores did not miss a beat. Elsewhere only the contraction creaks and a lone scurrying mouse broke the silence, so Vidy went on. She trod on the stairs close to the wall where they would make the least amount of noise and went on into the store where she had been careful to spot certain items of food while gathering stuff for Beard that afternoon.

She wanted a can of corned beef, a can of sardines and two cans of tomatoes and some pilot biscuit. That would be her rations until she got over the mountains. She would carry matches, too, and a couple of candles.

Quietly she gathered these things together. She dropped them and her bundle into a sugar sack which she flung over her shoulder. Still carrying the cat she went through the kitchen to the rear door. She paused for a moment outside while Phoebe came out from under the building to lick her ankle. Phoebe smelled the cat and began to growl.

"Pipe down," Vidy whispered desperately. "Phoebe, keep quiet."

Phoebe growled once more to show her independence, then crinkled her eyebrows, switched her tail and sulked. Vidy hunkered down to whisper to the dog.

"Foller me," she said. "Savvy?"

Vidy just could not bear to leave her entire family behind. She was running out on her pa, and the two lady burros, Catherine and Pearley. She had to take someone along over the mountains, and that would have to be Phoebe for all her temperamental habits.

With a pang of homesickness Vidy straightened up. She went along the back of the building, careful not to step on tin cans and broken bottles, and came into the alley leading to the darkened main street. There Phoebe growled again. The cat tensed as if getting ready to spring on a bird. Vidy froze solid. She had run straight into a man who had been waiting there.

"Vidy," he said, "That hound'll wake up—"

Phoebe began to bark.

Vidy ran down the alley and scooted up the boardwalk to its end and out of town. She ran just as hard as she could with the dog following her. She lost her bundle. She even dropped the cat. But she kept on

running until she had passed the last house and only then did she learn that it was no use at all. This man was running beside her, easily keeping up with her. It seemed like he could run that way forever.

Vidy finally stopped where there was a tree she could lean against while gasping for her breath. The dog, thinking it was a game, ran around and around her, barking. The man stood back grinning faintly under the wide brim of his hat.

"Phoebe," Vidy gasped. "Quiet." The dog subsided disconsolately. Vidy stared with wide eyes at the man. "What do you want?" she asked brusquely when her heart and lungs had steadied so she could talk.

"Your old man told me you figured on running away tonight," he said. "He thought you and I were eloping."

He let that astounding statement hang in the air while the girl's lovely mouth fell open and her heart stopped beating. This was Bart Jerome who was talking to her like that. This was the man who had almost kissed her, she thought, earlier in the evening. It was Bart Jerome who was going to marry Yolanda Wallace.

"What on earth ever gave him that crazy notion?" she finally gasped.

"One thing and another," Bart said gently. He had stepped up closer to her when the hound stopped running in erratic circles. Now Phoebe banged her tail on the ground but the man ignored her. "He said that was why you came to town in the first place—to be near me?"

Vidy felt the rough bark of the tree against the palms of her hands. It did nothing to steady her nerves, though, or to ease the turmoil in her breast. Her great dark lashes fell because she no longer could look the man in the eyes.

"Pa's spent so much time prospecting all alone he's full up with nutty notions," Vidy said slowly, trying to make herself believe that the man would be convinced. "And—anyway—you see it's not so. I was running away alone."

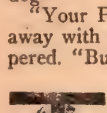
"Because of Yolanda?" Bart asked.

"No!" Vidy said. "Not because of Yolanda—or because of you." She was angry with the man who kept probing into her secrets. "I don't give a damn if you marry her or not. I was just running away. And if you'll let me—"

Bart suddenly sidled up to the tree where she was standing and pulled her around behind it. She began to fight with him, then quit when she saw some movement in the town. It looked like two or more men with donkeys, coming this way and keeping close to the shadows.

"Pa—" she whispered. "That Phoebe dog—"

"Your Pa said if he caught me running away with you he'd shoot me," Bart whispered. "But that isn't your father."



THE men were coming nearer at their steady and quiet pace. Neither wore a beard, so that put Vidy's pa out. As they drew up to the tree Vidy leaned down to pat Phoebe's head so the hound would not bark. Then she straightened up and her back was against the broad chest of Bart Jerome. She could feel his warm breath on her neck and the pounding of his heart through his shirt. It made her prickly and strange.

The men were passing now, unaware that they were being watched. One she recognized had been in the poker game that night, a man by the name of Max Morton. The other was an old reprobate of the hills named Honest John by the other miners because he was such a crook. When they had passed on Vidy still crouched with her breast against the tree and her back to Bart Jerome. She was completely panicked inside, and afraid.

His hands touched her elbows. He slowly turned her around and he looked down into her enormous blue eyes.

"Yolanda doesn't mean anything to me," he said. "I want you."

Vidy felt faint and giddy; she did not know what to do. Then she let herself go all soft and warm. He lifted her to him and kissed her. He kissed with a slow gentleness that was pure loveliness. Her lips responded. It was like lightning zigzagging clear through her from her bare feet up to the top of her dark head and back and forth between them. She had never known such ecstasy as this.

Then his lips lifted. He was smiling down on her.

"You want me, too," he said. "We'll go tell your Pa."

"Yes," she said eagerly. She lifted herself on her toes to kiss him again and sud-

denly remembered Lucky Lucas. Terror hit her like a shot. He did not savvy what had happened to her. His lips were reaching for her when she began to fight him off. "No—" she cried—"I don't want you. Let me go."

"But you do," he insisted grimly.

She was crying bitterly, and he moved his hands from her so she was supported only by the tree. For a moment he waited. Then stiffly he turned away and walked back toward town. She did not watch him go. She only slipped down to her haunches, buried her head in her arms and cried herself out.

Vidy rubbed her eyes with the back of her fists and glanced down the road. Two men were approaching, one very tall, walking with long strides, the other trotting to keep up with him. Bart Jerome was coming back, bringing Beard with him, and now all the run-away had gone from Vidy.

"I'm going to tell them," she said.

Her father and Bart Jerome arrived at the tree. Starlight and moonglow shone down on the girl. Her eyes were bright.

"What's the idea of telling this hombre you won't marry up with him?" her father said abruptly. "I kinda figured on doin' you a good turn by tellin' him to keep away. I kinda figured it would get his dander up. Now you say you won't have him." Beard shook his head. "That ain't gratitude."

Well, the time had come to face the music.

"I can't," she said. "I killed a man. I murdered Lucky Lucas."

* * *

Beard did exactly what Vidy had figured he would do—with one exception. She had thought Beard would make her face the consequences, and when she had finally confessed she was ready to walk right into town and up the gallow steps to take her needings. But Beard believed in doing things according to the law.

"Maybe you murdered this Lucky Lucas—and maybe you didn't," Beard said. "What we got to do is get Doc and go out and have a look at the remains.

They woke Doc and Bart hitched up the sawbones' rig while Doc was dressing. Then all four silently climbed into the buckboard and hit out for Fool's Gulch. There was not much talking on this trip. Doc and Beard rode on the seat.

The girl and Bart took their place in the small wagon bed; and because she had tried to run away once Beard insisted that Bart keep a close watch on her so she would not try it a second time. To do this he had to hold her hand—and that was the only satisfactory thing about this terrible trip.

"Whatever you did," Bart said, "I'm with you one hundred percent."

"Thanks," she said and nestled closer.

Dawn was breaking when they left town. It painted the canyons and gulches with red and purple and bright yellow. It brought out the birds and the clear blue of the mountain sky and the sharp, fine taste of the air. It made life very desirable to Vidy.

She turned her lovely face up to Bart.

"When—it's over—" she said, "I want you to be very good to Yolanda. Maybe she's a scatter-brain, but Lucky Lucas was always proposing to her. Even if she did laugh at him, I know she liked him."

"She never really wanted me," Bart said. "She never even noticed me until you came to town. She was carrying on that way only out of orneriness."

Vidy rested her shoulder upon his chest and braced her legs against the pitching of the wagon. The sun was hot above them now as they came up to Fool's Gulch. Over the rattle of wheels they could hear the chatter of the brook. Vidy had the distinct feeling that they were approaching home and that everything would be all right.

The wagon lurched as Doc turned into the gulch, and almost at the same instant something like a very big and exceedingly angry hornet hummed between Beard and Doc and right over Vidy's head. Beard and Doc swore briefly. Beard jumped off the seat onto the ground and Doc tried to haul in the excited horses. Another of those things whistled by.

This time Vidy heard the report of a rifle as Bart caught her in his arms and deserted the wagon. He ran stumbling over the rough road to the safety of a pile of huge boulders.

Bart hunkered down behind a big boulder with Vidy still in his arms.

"Looks like your dead man came to life," he said. Then he grinned at her and kissed her very thoroughly—while bullets chipped at the boulder. He kissed her half a dozen times good and hard until they were both

out of breath. Then he set her down behind the pile of boulders and angled over for a look at the rifleman.

"He's in your cabin," he announced. She moved over for a look, too. She could not see Lucky Lucas, but the muzzle of a rifle poking out one of the cabin windows announced that the place was not deserted. "He must have found the lead carbonates your old man was describing," Bart went on. "He's put up claim stakes."

SHE could see those, too, in the area where her father had run across that annoying black sand that he thought was no good. Then the rifle barked again and she ducked, but the bullet hadn't been fired at her, and when she got to peek again Bart Jerome was running toward the cabin in a crazy zig-zag.

Bart had a six-shooter in his hand. It was jutting fire and lead as he ran. The rifle slid across the window-sill—then pointed toward the sky. A moment later a burro ran out from behind the shack. Then another rifle edged out around the door. That was when Vidy learned that they were not fighting Lucky Lucas at all.

That Max Morton had heard Bart telling about carbonates last night at the poker game. More than likely he and his friend, Honest John, had run out here as soon as they could to make a claim on the place where Beard McCoy had lived all these years. All this came to her in a flash. Now Bart was running straight in, thinking he had put out of commission the only man there. But Honest John, himself, was behind that rifle that Bart did not see in the doorway.

Vidy had no gun. She picked up a rock. . . . She screamed.

Bart stopped running to look around. A bullet howled past him, a chunk of lead that would have gotten him if he had kept on running. He hit the dirt. As he did so Vidy broke from the shelter of the boulders. She heaved her rock but it fell far short of the cabin. She picked up another and kept on running.

Doc did not have a gun, but Beard did, and he joined the battle. He drove Honest John from the doorway. Bart plunged ahead another couple dozen yards to flank the cabin. Honest John took a carrom shot at him that knocked him flat. Vidy threw another rock that disappeared inside the cabin window. Bart got to his knees and went on that way. He went right up to the cabin door and emptied his pistol.

And when Vidy got there she passed out cold. Vidy had never before in all her life fainted. But what she saw in that cabin was too much for her. It was not Honest John who had his hands above his head, or the stranger, Max Morton, prone on the floor. It was Lucky Lucas, all bound up like a hog-tied calf, sitting in a corner.

"This is a damned dangerous spot," Lucky Lucas said.

And that was when Vidy fainted. . . .

Even unconscious Vidy worried. She worried about Bart Jerome. As it happened, it was not necessary for her to worry about this. Doc took very good care of Bart. Doc also put a fresh patch on Lucky Lucas's head. Then Doc gave Vidy some smelling salts that brought her to.

Vidy staggered around a bit until she landed in Bart's arms. Bart's face was red, and he was very much excited.

"We got ten million dollars here," Bart was saying. "You got a claim to it, too, Lucky, and you, Doc, and you, Beard."

"Not me, Beard," McCoy said. "I'm gettin' me a ten buck shave. I'm gettin' rid of this old hay."

"And me," Lucky Lucas said, "I'm marryin' up with that Yolanda Wallace—if a certain party don't tell another certain party a certain story."

"Thanks for livin'," Vidy said. Then she scowled at Bart Jerome. "Say—you seem excited about this black dirt."

"Good Lord!" Bart practically shouted. "I ought to be." Then he got the point, and Vidy remembered how her pa had carried on when he had thought he was going to make a strike, and she forgave Bart Jerome. Bart was blushing.

"Pardon me," he said, "but I have to do a little assay work on my claim."

He kissed her. Even with everyone there it was a very wonderful kiss. And she thought that when he had registered this claim and really went to work on mining it—well—gosh—it was sort of like the mine mining the miner or something. Anyway, it was tremendous and wonderful.

THE END

♥ DON'T KISS ♥ THE CUSTOMERS

By Ennen Reaves Hall

Every miner in town pestered the lady barber for a kiss—till beautiful Penny made the mistake of giving one.

PENNY'S big brown eyes danced a little but her face was perfectly sober as she looked at the long figure stretched out in her barber chair. Burr Nelson's face was smooth as brown velvet and his hair was neatly trimmed.

She said accusingly: "Listen, Mister, how many shaves a day do you need? You were in here just a few hours ago."

The owner of the Bessie N mine squirmed under the lash of her voice. "Aw, gee, Penny. Have a heart. You don't want me going around looking like that bearded partner of mine, do you? Besides, how else can I see you? You never leave this shop for a single minute."

"I've got a living to make," she told him. "And you're not helping any by haunting this place, either. Please go, Mister Nelson. Here comes a customer and I need that chair."

The long figure didn't move. "Say 'Burr' and I will. Provided you promise to walk with me after supper. You've never seen the canyon by moonlight, I bet. Let me show it to you, Penny."

Penny hesitated. "I'd like to, Burr." Almost unconsciously she used his given name, then felt color rush into her face at the realization. "People will talk, though. Nobody in Rainbow City likes me, anyway."

He caught her hand and squeezed it. "That's because you're so pretty. Wait for me at the big rock above the falls, Penny. Promise—or you'll have to shave me again. I won't budge."

The new customer was waiting so Penny promised and sighed with relief as Burr got up and reached for his hat. These busy miners didn't like to wait and she couldn't build up a business with just one persistent customer. A shadow blurred her eyes as the thought crossed her mind that maybe she couldn't build up a business in Rainbow City anyway.

Most of the miners, she'd found, didn't care whether they shaved and had their cuts or not. Of those who did care, the married ones didn't dare come to a woman barber and the others came expecting to flirt with her and when she repulsed them they didn't come back. Except Burr Nelson.

She knew Burr was right in saying she was too pretty to be popular in the mining camp. There was a natural prejudice against a woman barber, anyway, and a pretty one hadn't a chance with the women all against her. In the few weeks she'd been in Rainbow City Penny Bond had often wished she was big and ungainly, with horse-face features, like the waitress at the hotel, or freckle faced and fat like the school teacher, instead of having a heart-shaped face framed in hair the color of the gold.

The new customer was looking at her boldly. Penny lathered his face so briskly he had to shut his eyes until the job was done. Then he got up and looked at himself in the little mirror on the shaving bar Penny had built herself.

"Well, dang my socks," he said, in surprise, "iffen that ain't as good a job as I ever got. And from a gal barber at that!"

Penny was tired and the remark nettled her. "What's wrong with being a girl barber?" she asked sharply. Then wished she hadn't as the look she dreaded deepened in the miner's eyes as he grinned at her.

"Well, nothing, I'd say. Only I can think of a lot nicer things to do for a man than cutting off his whiskers."

He moved toward her purposefully and Penny backed away. Her first impulse was to slap the grinning face with the avid eyes.

She said accusingly: "Listen, Mister, how many shaves a day do you need?"

Then she thought of the fifty cents he owed her for the shave and she didn't dare. Fifty cents is a lot of money when you owe a three-weeks board bill at an unfriendly hotel dining-room—and customers so few and far between. So she managed a smile as she dodged his reaching hands.

"That'll be fifty cents, Mister. And cheap, considering what I did for your looks, don't you think?"

Still grinning, he pulled out a dollar and offered it to her. Penny reached for it cautiously but he was too quick for her. As her finger tips touched the money his other hand grabbed her wrist and pulled her quickly against him.

"Sure it's cheap," he said, laughing loudly. "Do you sell kisses cheap too, Big Eyes?"

With his face so close to hers Penny realized for the first time that he'd been drinking. Just enough to get ugly, if angered. She couldn't afford a scene, not knowing what moment another potential customer might appear. She had to get rid of him quickly, but quietly.

Without attempting to pull free of his arms she said, coolly: "I don't sell kisses, Mister. But I give them away to nice customers. Turn me loose and you'll see."

His arms relaxed in his surprise. "That ain't what the boys been saying. I got to be showed."

TANDING on tiptoe, Penny pecked him lightly on the cheek, then slipped adroitly out of his arms. Her move brought her facing the small window for the first time since the scene began. To her horror she saw a girl's face there, pressed close against the glass. A thin, sallow face with blue eyes as bright as china beads and lips pursed in excited satisfaction over what she'd just seen.

Penny's heart was suddenly as heavy as lead. Bessie Cookston was sure to misconstrue that scene and the story would spread like wildfire through the camp. Bessie was the hotel keeper's daughter and had already made it plain that she didn't like the newcomer in Rainbow City. This wouldn't help. Penny sighed and put the barber chair between herself and the miner.

"We've got company," she said, nodding toward the window. "Here's your change and the boys are right when they say I don't go in for kissing, Mister. I keep busy earning my living honest."

The man pocketed his change and left hurriedly. Penny followed him to the door with the vague idea of calling Bessie in and explaining. But the other girl had gone on and didn't turn when Penny called. Penny sighed again and knew it was just as well.

Bessie wouldn't want to understand. For some reason she didn't make known the hotel keeper's daughter had chosen to distrust Penny from the start and there seemed little possibility of friendship between them. Was it just because Penny was a barber, following a trade few women cared to adopt?

Penny thought it was more than that, but knew again the fleeting wish that Nick Bond had taught his motherless daughter a more lady-like profession and one that didn't make her feel like a social outcast everywhere she went. She'd hoped it would be different, up here in the new, mountain mining town where she'd come following Nick's death. But the story had been the same.

The faint hope that Bessie might not repeat what she had seen died a quick death when Penny went to the hotel for supper. Men up and down the long table gave her sly, hopeful glances and the freckled-faced school teacher edged her chair as far away as possible and turned a plump shoulder toward her.

Even Nettie, the horse faced waitress, set dishes deliberately out of Penny's reach and pretended not to hear her requests to be served. When Penny, color high in her cheeks, had to repeat her order loudly the waitress sniffed disdainfully and raised her voice in reply so that everyone listened expectantly.

"I reckon you can see I'm busy, Miss, waiting on decent people. If you don't like it here I guess we can stand it if you leave."

Penny got up quickly, stung as much by the smiles that ran up and down the length of the table as by the woman's insolence. Anger was mounting so high in her she knew she must get out quickly or anything might happen.

"I certainly don't like it," she said sharply.

As she went through the door Nettie's

audible voice followed her, mingled with the women's nervous titters. "She don't like it here! Hunh! Reckon there's things going on since she came the rest of us don't like, either."

In her small room behind the shop Penny had a meager supper of canned beans, and vowed she'd never go back to the hotel. But she knew she'd have to, or pay up that overdue bill for board. Feeling lonelier than she'd ever been in her life she sat in the darkened room until dusk leveled the steep mountain sides, then slipped out to steal along the foot path that led to the edge of the canyon.

She knew the last shreds of her reputation would be torn apart if she was seen out alone after dark. Or, worse still, with a man. In that one respect Rainbow City was not typical of the rough mountain mining camps of the early nineties—there was little of the lawlessness and lax morality usual to such places.

Most of the miners worked small hard rock claims of their own and many of them had brought their families up into the mountains with them. By common consent the rougher element of men and women had been forbidden residence in Rainbow City. That had been one of the things that had attracted Penny to the place. She hadn't once dreamed that she might represent this undesirable element to the straight-laced women of the community.

At the edge of the canyon, where a huge boulder divided the path, Penny stood entranced at the panorama the moonlight revealed and listened to the roar of the river far below. When she heard footsteps on the path her heart started racing. That would be Burr Nelson and until that moment of loneliness Penny hadn't realized how much she had come to look for the tall, good looking miner's visits to the shop. And this would be their first rendezvous, without the usual interferences found at the shop.

BUT when she turned around it wasn't Burr Nelson who stood there. Instead, it was a bearded giant, whose small eyes peering out from under bushy brows seemed to be the only features of his face not hidden by a heavy growth of black hair. Penny had often seen Burr's partner, "Bush" Cummings, and wondered what he really looked like under that growth of hair.

Cummings' lips parted in what she took to be a smile. "Howdy, Ma'am," he muttered. "Fine even', ain't it?"

"Yes, it is," Penny admitted, then was discouragingly silent. She wanted him to go. Not because she was afraid of him, for he was an oddly taciturn man who'd never offered any show of interest in her. She just wanted him gone so that she could be alone with Burr.

He made no move to go. Abruptly he asked, "You lonesome, too?"

Before she could stop the words Penny admitted she was. Then added hastily, "But I'm used to it so it doesn't matter."

He shuffled closer and her heart lurched at the queer glitter in his eyes. "No need to be," he volunteered. "You're too young and pretty to rot with lonesomeness like I've done. A gal like you and a man like me needs life."

He gestured vaguely with a big hand, as though life was something waiting far below in the valley settlements. Surprise held Penny mute and her silence seemed to encourage him.

"Me and you could go down there and not be lonesome no more, Penny. I've got dust. A lot of it. Enough to buy you anything you want."

A cheery whistling cut through his words and relief swept through Penny. She knew that was Burr and his arrival would end this embarrassing scene, save her having to hurt this odd giant's feelings.

"Damn," Cummings muttered, "that's Burr coming. Always butting in so a man can't get in a word. But you listen to me, Penny. It's me that's got the dust, not him. Don't let his soft talk fool you."

Penny wanted only to get rid of him. "Please go," she begged. "I—I don't want him to see us here like this. He might not understand."

"I get you," he said quickly, and Penny had the feeling he had given her words a meaning she hadn't intended them to have. "I'll see you tomorrow, gal. You'll know then I'm not just bragging, too."

Cummings was out of sight when Burr came up. "Penny!" Burr cried eagerly, "you did come and me almost turned gray headed for fear you wouldn't. You got any hair dye in that prettying-up place of yours?"

Penny laughed. "You're so crazy, Burr."

He reached for her hand. "Is that why you like me, Penny?"

"Well, are you conceited!" Penny jibed, though her heart was in her throat, choking her. "Who said I liked you?"

"You did," he said, suddenly serious. "You say it every time you look at me. Tell me, Penny, have you meant it?"

"I—I don't know," she faltered.

He drew her close against him and bent his head to hers. "We'll find out," he whispered, and his lips took hers in a kiss that seemed to lift Penny right off the earth and plant her among the stars.

There wasn't any doubt in her heart when that kiss ended. This was the one man in all the world for her. Her heart was singing it, the roar of the river was shouting it and all the trees and little night insects were whispering it.

"Do you know now?" Burr murmured, and Penny could only cling to him and offer her lips again to say wordlessly what she couldn't put into trite phrases.

"We'll go away for awhile, darling," Burr said, after long, blissful moments. "I can afford a rest and Bush can look after the mine."

A shadow passed over Penny's happiness. "Burr, he gives me the creeps. Do you trust him?"

"Sure, he's all right. A little touched, maybe, on the subject of women. Don't like them, won't speak to one if he can help it. Otherwise he's okay."

That description silenced Penny. She was suddenly very sorry for the bearded miner who had made love to her so crudely and abruptly. She was so happy in the security of Burr's arms that she wanted the whole world to be happy with her. Every lonesome and unpleasant moment she had known were now forgotten and she resolved silently to do what she could to help Bush Cummings forget and overcome his loneliness.

She said no more about him to Burr, but listened with a full heart while he made plans for their wonderful future. It was late when she slipped back into her little room and knelt by the lumpy cot bed to say a prayer of thankfulness that fate had sent her to Rainbow City. . . .

Humming happily, Penny was busily cleaning the shop the next morning when the door opened. Looking up she saw Burr standing there. Her cry of pleasure died unuttered on her lips at sight of his tight, angry face.

Without preamble he said: "Dick Breen is bragging all over camp that you kissed him yesterday. Is that true?"

"I don't even know Dick Breen," Penny said. "Of course I didn't kiss him."

His face registered unbelief. "But Bessie says she saw you. Right here in this room."

Penny understood then. "Oh, that. Yes, I did kiss him, Burr. But I can explain . . ."

He didn't give her a chance for explanations. "And Bush Cummings says you met him at the Rock last night and that you practically promised to marry him. I suppose you can explain that, too?"

"Of course," Penny said eagerly. "I didn't really promise Cummings anything. We heard you coming and—"

He interrupted again: "Seems the thing that needs explaining is how I could have been such a fool as to think you were in love with me. You're anybody's girl, it seems. I damn near knocked Breen's head off for saying that but looks like it was true. Guess it's good business to kiss all your customers. He shook his head. "A gent sure can get mixed up."

Cowering under the tone of his voice and fearing guilt was written all over her, Penny couldn't speak for the cold, hard lump that was choking her. Then Burr was gone and she was alone with all her broken dreams scattered in ugly fragments about her.

HOW long she sat there, tearless and cold, she didn't know but the opening of the door aroused her. Hope came to swift life at the thought that it might be Burr coming back to say he was wrong. But it wasn't Burr she saw when she looked up. It was Bessie Cookston who was staring at her, pale eyes hard and triumphant.

Bessie laughed and the sound of it was another lash laid across Penny's bleeding heart. "So you thought you'd steal my man as well as Nettie's! Well, you can't, lady barber! Burr Nelson ain't the fool Dick Breen is."

Two words Bessie used were clamoring loud above the others. "Your man?" Penny repeated, dully. "Burr Nelson isn't your man."

"We're going to be married," Bessie said, almost savagely. "He named his mine, the Bessie Nelson, for me. We were happy until you came along and bewitched him."

She raised her voice until it seemed to pop like a whip over Penny's head. "But he knows the kind of girl you are now! Me and Nettie have been watching you and we told him. And we're telling all the other women of the town so they can watch their men, too. You might as well start packing to leave, Penny Bond. We women don't want your kind in Rainbow City and we won't stand for your staying here, making fools of our men."

With a gesture as savage as her voice she threw down a roll of bills at Penny's feet. "There's money to buy you out provided you leave today. Before the men come down from their diggings. And Dad said never mind the board bill you owe him. Better take this and leave, Penny Bond. You'll starve trying to get along in Rainbow City after this."

Defeat was bitter in Penny as she stared at the money, wondering if she could bring herself to touch it. It was her only chance to get away and that was what she wanted most to do. Not because of this jealous girl's threats, or the prospect of starving to death in Rainbow City. Those things hardly registered in Penny's tortured mind.

What hurt almost beyond endurance was the knowledge that Burr didn't believe in her, that he'd listened to the ugly stories about her and accepted them without question. That meant Burr didn't really love her as he'd let her believe last night. And he was promised in marriage to this sallow-faced girl. What was the difference where she got the money just so she could go away and never see Burr Nelson or Rainbow City again?

Bessie was getting impatient. "Well? Do you leave today or not? The stage to Denver comes through at three o'clock."

Penny was suddenly too tired to even think any more. "I'll take it," she said, dully and never looked up as the door banged shut behind Bessie.

An hour later Penny was just finishing the packing of her few personal possessions when she heard the front door open and went to the door to see who it was. Her heart lurched as she saw Bush Cummings, his eyes bright with an avid eagerness.

"Well, here I am, gal." He was breathing jerkily, as though in high excitement. "I told you I'd show up with the money today. Got it all, too. But we've got to hurry." His eyes went past her to the packed little horsehair trunk and telescope bag. "You all ready to go?"

Instinctively, Penny felt that something was wrong. Last night Burr had talked about the nice little stake he and Bush had laid by. But what did Cummings mean by "all"?

She said, carefully, "You can't have very much gold. You've just a half interest in the Bessie N. You're just bragging, Bush."

He grinned, his eyes turning sly. "Once you see my saddle bags you won't think I'm bragging, gal. Close to fifty pounds of dust and nuggets I got. That'll buy us anything we want in Denver. But we got to get going before Burr misses me. . . ."

He stopped abruptly but he'd said enough. Penny knew then. Burr's trusted partner was making off with his share of

(Please continue on page 93)

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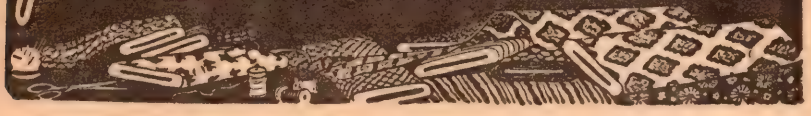

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By Anita Allen

LISSA, a bag in each hand, crossed the waiting room of the stage station to the window marked, *Passenger agent.* The man behind the window continued to chew on his cigar and her eyes darkened with disapproval. Lissa's eyes, dark as purple flowers, dominated her face in spite of her vivid mouth and Norse-bright hair. And they could suggest either a mysterious Spring night or harsh northern lightning. Just now they held the first, faint warning flashes of storm.

The agent hastily removed his cigar. She said: "I thought someone would meet me, but he hasn't come. Maybe you can help me?"

His glance traveled over her, taking in everything from the cerise bow on her dark hat to the hem of her long, midnight blue traveling dress. "Who'd you expect, Ma'am?"

"My father, Jake Nansen. Do you know him? He has a mine on Wash Hill. His partner's Harry Whalen."

The man's eyelids became heavy, wrinkled hoods. "Yeah, I know him. But he couldn't get here. See that man near the door? The big hombre? He came in your Dad's place."

Lissa swung around. He shouted:

"Riordan!"

The man started toward them at once and the term 'big hombre' did not describe him. He was huge rather than big, with powerful, heavy shoulders, although there was no excess weight on his great frame. His long, rolling stride pulled her glance down to his boots which, made of Spanish leather, possessed the sharpest and most pointed toes she had ever seen. "Why does he want to call attention to the size of his feet?" she wondered, as the man came up.

"This is the young lady." The passenger agent said. "Jake Nansen's daughter."

The sharp-toed boots halted and she looked up at him; into eyes the color of water running over dead leaves.

"I'm Don Riordan, Ma'am. Your father —well, I've got something to tell you. Let's get out of here first."

She stared at him, trying to understand his words, noticing, automatically, that the brown of his hair blended with the tones of his dark, square face. "What do you have to tell me? Has something happened to Dad?"

"I'll explain on the way," he said, almost curtly. And then he halted, the water-gray eyes sharpening against her face, the pupils suddenly widening as he actually saw her. In that second, she knew exactly how he was seeing her. It was in his glance and on his face. The Norse-fair frame of curls glistening above white skin and surprisingly dark blue eyes. Her mouth as flaming as the cerise ribbon on her hat. Her slim body clearly defined under the tight-bodiced traveling dress.

"I'm sorry about this, Miss—"

"Call me Lissa. If you're a friend of Dad's—"

"Thanks." One huge hand came down carefully on both of hers, closed gingerly and then, abruptly, became a demanding grip. "Don't worry about your Dad. He's healthy enough, I guess, but—" Again he broke off. "Better explain outside. Are these your bags?" He picked up the suitcases, held both in one hand and took her arm. "This way."

"But I have to know, first—"

"This is no place to talk. It'll only be

Whether or not that big, good-looking Hudson hombre was an outlaw, lovely Lissa wanted to be in his arms—just once more.

Brad's arms tightened. "Nothing changes a bad hombre, Lissa. . . . Not even love."

a few minutes." The hand on her arm was propelling her forward, through the door to the platform and across it to a waiting buckboard. And once more, before he released her she felt his fingers tighten in sudden grasping.

There was a girl sitting in the buckboard. Her hair, in the sunlight, was metallically bright and her smile looked as if it had been painted onto a mirthless mouth. "This is Goldie Jones," Riordan said, quickly. "I figured you might like to have another woman along while I explained about your Dad."

He lifted Lissa into the carriage and, as she sat down beside Goldie, got into the driver's seat. He snapped the whip and the buckboard rolled away from the stage depot.

"Now what about Dad? What did you come to tell me?"

He kept his eyes on the road and shifted the reins. "It's just that—Goldie, you give her the story."

"Sure." The other girl put her hand on Lissa's shoulder. "Your Dad's had some trouble, kid. Now don't get excited—maybe it'll work out all right."

"But what's the trouble? Where is he now?"

"Well . . ." Goldie's arm was around her and it felt too heavy. "He had a fight with his partner, Harry Whalen. A man named Eubanks—Dave Eubanks—was at the mine when it happened. Whalen knocked your father down and he pulled a gun and shot him dead."

Lissa pulled her clenched hands apart. She stared at Riordan's square, dark face. "I don't believe it," she said, and her lips were sticks of wood rubbed against each other. "Dad wouldn't kill anyone and he —why, he and his partner were the best of friends. He mentioned him in every letter!"

Riordan snapped the whip again. "I'm —we were just trying to explain what Dave Eubanks told the sheriff."

LISSA'S hands moved together once more but she did not feel their meeting. The town was behind her now and the buckboard was traveling up a wagon trail which twisted endlessly toward distant hills. Her father had killed his partner and the sheriff had arrested him.

She snatched at Riordan's arm. "Stop! If he's in jail, the jail must be in the town. Turn around right away. I have to find him!"

"There's more," he said, heavily. "He's not in town. He was arrested four days ago and held without bail. But last night he escaped."

"Escaped? Got away?"

"Yeah. He and a couple of other hombres in the lockup made a break. They knocked out the jailer when he came with their food and took his keys. Nobody saw them leave and the break wasn't discovered for hours."

Her lips parted slowly and her face turned a dull white.

Goldie patted her arm. "Hold tight, kid. Maybe it's not as bad as it sounds. You'll be all right at my place—I have a little spread not far from here—until you know what to do. After you've had a chance to pull yourself together—"

"Your—place?" Lissa's still parted lips shaped the words harshly. "I'm going to Dad's cabin on Wash Hill."

"You can't. There's not another house within miles and it'd be dangerous for a girl to stay there alone."

Lissa straightened until she was very erect and flame pushed against the dark surface of her eyes. "Alone or not, I'm going to the mine. That's where I belong."

Riordan, sending the horses around the second bend of a horseshoe curve, jerked at the reins and braced himself as if to pull the animals from their feet. The buckboard jolted to a stop and Lissa saw a man sitting his pony in the middle of the trail. There was a gun in his hand and it was leveled at Riordan's chest.

"Just wait where you are," he called. "I'll be right with you. Don't reach for your iron—you either, Goldie. I'd hate to kill a pretty gal.

Riordan's big body hunched forward and Goldie's breath made a hissing sound. Lissa told herself: "This is a holdup." But she felt neither fear nor interest, thinking only of getting to her father's mine. After that she could find some way to help him.

She stared at the horseman walking his mount toward them, noticing that his face was lean almost to the point of sharpness. His mouth was wide above a broad chin and compared to Riordan he seemed boy-

ishly slight. His pony moved as if exhausted. Sweat made dark stains on his dusty clothes. But the broad-brimmed Stetson pulled down over his eyes was incongruously spotless.

"Howdy." He reined in with the gun fixed. And Lissa saw the blunt-tipped fingers, the weathered skin of his muscular hands.

"Get it over with." Riordan barked. "What do you want?"

"Turn back to the forks. Then drive Miss Nansen to her Dad's place on Wash Hill."

Riordan's big body stirred—and the stranger's Colt jabbed into his chest. "Take it easy. Hand over your iron, too. Have you got one, Goldie?"

"No-o! How do you know my name—or who Lissa is? Where are you from?"

The corners of his lips moved. As if he had started to smile and then changed his mind. "I'm no one you'd know and I'm from a lot of places." His eyes did not leave the other man as he spoke and when Riordan surrendered his gun he pushed it through his belt, above the second Colt strapped to his thigh. "That tells everything about me. Not much to tell about any saddle tramp."

"Mister, saddle tramps don't know my name—"

"Cut it out, Goldie," Riordan said. "Let him go on with his act. Maybe I'll show him a new way to finish it."

"Better not try—yet," the stranger murmured. "Start turning that buckboard."

Riordan obeyed, and said softly: "Don't get panicky, Lissa. I figure on taking care of you."

But she was watching the horseman with an intensity which dulled all other sense. His hair was red as polished quartz and there was a stillness on his face, as if he had erected an inner shield. His glance moved slowly to find hers and he smiled. The inner shield broke and his wide mouth warmed into a grin which shot up to his eyes. Then the buckboard was moving downslope and he was riding behind it.

AN HOUR later, Riordan turned the carriage off the trail and she saw mine workings against the shoulder of a barren hill. Near the claim was a log cabin. As they drew in, the stranger said: "This is it. Help Miss Nansen out."

She glanced at him, quickly, thinking: "He's taking me where I wanted to go. But why? He must know my father but Don Riordan and Goldie Jones act as if they'd never seen him before.

As her feet touched the sloping ground, he spoke again. "Now, Riordan, you and Goldie can head for town."

"Listen. . . ." The huge body, crouched on the carriage seat, was tensing, gathering itself. "I'm not turning Lissa over to you or anyone else." He swayed forward, the great muscles of his back rippling under the thin flannel shirt. And Lissa knew that in another second he would spring at the armed rider.

"Foot!" Goldie screamed. "Are you crazy!" And she hurled herself across him so that her body pinned him in the seat.

He jerked upright and brushed her away, his eyes like striking fists. "Don't ever try anything like that again."

She drew back, staring. "Maybe I—get it," she said, thickly.

"Lissa," the red-headed stranger said, "It's up to you. Do you want them to stay here with you?"

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The inner shield was guarding his face again but there were flickering bits of light in his eyes. Hazel eyes which didn't belong with his hair or his still face. "No," she said. "There's no reason for them to stay. I wanted to come here, anyhow—I fully intended to come because this is where I belong."

Riordan, moving deliberately, got out of the buckboard and came close to her. "You don't understand, Ma'am. This hombre's a stranger on the range. I've never seen him before and I know every man in the county. I can't just leave you here and I won't—"

Goldie leaned from the buckboard and laughed harshly. "Oh, yes you will, Foot. We're going back to town."

He halted as if he had been roped, and stepped silently to the carriage. As he stepped in, Lissa saw the dark flush on his jaws and the blaze in his water-gray eyes. She watched the buckboard go down trail and as it disappeared, looked up at the red-haired rider. "Maybe you'd better tell me what this is all about."

He got down and he was not as slight as she had thought. There was an air of readiness about him which marked him as plainly as the other man's size. "You're Jake Nansen's daughter and I don't like Foot Riordan."

"Foot?" she asked, remembering Goldie had also used the word. And without waiting for an answer, rushed on: "Then, you do know my father! Where is he? What's happened to him and—"

He shook his head. "I can't tell you anything more than you know. I haven't seen him in weeks—and I never have really known him. I just happened to run into him once in awhile. Guess I said that I moved around a lot."

"Then how did you know me and why—"

"He showed me a picture of you and talked about you a lot. Described you. I heard he'd been arrested and then broken out of jail so when I saw you leaving town with Foot Riordan, I took a short cut across the range to stop you."

"Why?"

"Riordan's involved in every crooked deal in this district. He runs both the saloons in town, but he's gotten control of too many mining claims—right after the miners made strikes. Sometimes the men owed him money and had to turn over their property to make it good. But usually they were found dead, and later on Foot showed up with the deeds for their mines, saying he'd staked them."

"I—see. Are you sure—or are you just telling me stories you've heard?"

The corners of his lips moved and he turned toward the cabin. "That might be the answer. I'll take your bags in."

He caught up the suitcases. Following him, she entered a bare-floored, light room which contained a plank table, several straight chairs, two built in bunks and a shabby leather couch. "I think this is the kitchen," he said, opening a door into the lean-to. "Yeah. There's water, and wood to start a fire. You'll be all right and I'll come around tomorrow—just in case you need anything?"

"You mean you're going now—leaving me alone?"

"Yeah." He came back to her. "Don't worry too much. Your father may get across the state border. He'll probably send you word, somehow, and the best bet is to wait until you hear from him."

She was silent, trying to understand what his face told her; watching the light lift into his hazel eyes.

"My name's Brad Hudson," he said. "That's all you need to know."

Warmth shot into her cheeks. But before she could speak he held out his hand. "This'd be easier if you weren't so pretty or if you weren't—you."

"What does that mean?"

"A lot of things." And his blunt-tipped fingers closed on her hands. "Maybe this." He bent over her, but the movement was slow and his glance held hers as if waiting for her to speak. When she did not he kissed her.

She turned her head, quickly. Or rather, told herself to do so. But her mouth was still under his and there was a faint pulse-beat in the flesh of his lips. It grew stronger and pounded against her own mouth, leaving flame behind it. . . . She had to stop this. Had to free herself at once.

His arms tightened. Her hands moving up to his shoulders felt the hard muscles under the thinness of his shirt. And then her hands closed and her mouth surrendered.

"Lissa." He was speaking to her, but her lips still held the pulsing fire. And although he had released her, the pressure of his lips seemed real. "I'm going now. I'll be back as soon as I can. Better take this and keep it close to you."

He lifted a gun from its holster and put it into her hand, closing her fingers over it.

Minutes or seconds later, she realized that the door had shut behind him and that he was gone.

Y THE time Lissa had unpacked and changed from the traveling dress into a thin gingham frock, the mountain dusk was deep. She cooked some of the food she found in the lean-to and then went to bed, placing Brad Hudson's gun on a chair where she could reach it without getting up. Her eyes were closing in sleep when she heard the sound from the front of the house. A soft, stealthy sound, as if someone were scratching at one of the windows. Instantly wide awake she caught up the gun and got out of bed. Her bare feet made no sound and she held her breath as she reached the window.

"Lissa—" Her name was spoken in the faintest of whispers, and her body went taught with waiting. "Lissa!" This time the voice was stronger. "This is Dad. Let me in—don't make a light!"

"Dad!" In spite of herself the word broke into a cry.

"Be still! Open the door."

She groped toward it, pushed back the bolt and felt him slip into the room. His hands found her in the darkness, then, and for a moment he held her tightly in his arms. "Don't be afraid," he said, letting her go. "I didn't shoot Harry. Come over here."

He led her back to the bed and they sat down side by side. "I can't stay long, so I want to tell you what I can. That day—when Harry Whalen was shot, he had gone into town to the county assayer's office to leave some specimens from our claim. There couldn't be any doubt we'd made a rich strike—even the assayer said that as soon as he saw the stuff. Harry felt so good he'd stopped at the saloon for a few drinks and met Dave Eubanks who came out to the mine with him. We sat around in front of the cabin talking and as Harry got up, he fell. I thought, at first, that Dave'd tripped him. There was a shot and Eubanks jumped me. When I came to I was tied up and the sheriff was there."

"Maybe this Dave Eubanks—"

"No. He wasn't even wearing a gun. I don't know where the shot came from. Might've been someone hiding in the brush near the cabin."

She stiffened. "You shouldn't have come here tonight. What if the—sheriff or his men are watching this place?"

"We took care of that. Hudson looked everything over first and he's on guard down-trail where he'll see anyone heading in this direction."

"Hudson?" Her voice lifted. "Brad Hudson? He brought me here—which means you *did* send him, although he said he hadn't seen you. Why did he lie?"

"Because he didn't know, then, who might be waiting in the brush or hiding near, listening. The whole town probably knew you were arriving today—and the sheriff might've figured you'd come here."

"Oh—" In the darkness, the flesh of her lips was suddenly warm as if a tiny, pulsing flame were touching them. "Who is he? I mean where is he from and how long have you known him?"

"I met him two days after I was arrested. He was thrown into jail as one of the gunnies who stole five hundred head of cattle a few miles south of town. He and his gang simply rode onto the range, cut them out and drove them to the shipping point where a buyer paid for them, without knowing they were stolen."

"He's a—cattle thief! You called him a 'gunnie'."

"Yeah. That's what he is all right. Been riding the gunsmoke trail a long time. In and out of jail constantly. But that's none of my business. After we became cell-mates he took a liking to me and we broke out of the place together. I'd have been caught by this time—"

"But you shouldn't have escaped, Dad! You should have gone to trial and proved your innocence!"

Her father chuckled grimly. "Even if I could've proved it I wouldn't have had a chance. The jailer told us the sheriff was swearing in extra deputies because he'd found out a mob was gathering to take me out and hang me."

Her hands locked on his. "Then what'll happen now? Why are you staying here?"

"Because we got some ideas I can't tell you about yet. Now, I'm going, Lissa. Don't be scared in the cabin. We're not far away."

He kissed her and slipped through the door into the thick night. And when she returned to bed she felt more alone than ever. Lonelier than at any time in her life. Brad Hudson was a gunnie and a criminal. . . .

The next morning, Lissa put on a short, divided skirt, a dark shirt and heavy boots to explore her father's property. Starting toward the raw-looking mine workings, she halted in sudden distaste and turned back to the cleared space about the cabin.

A few yards from the house she found two mud-and-dobe out-buildings, one of them a wagon shed and the other a barn. In the barn were two sturdy saddle ponies, and after finding the grain bins, she fed and watered them.

As she left the barn, a big, rangy horse shot off the trail. Riordan waved his hat. "All right?" he called and reined to a hard stop.

"You look more than all right," he added, as he got out of the saddle and trailed his pony's reins. "Fact is, you look better than anybody I've ever seen." He finished on a grin, but his gray eyes had that look of darkened, stirring water.

"Thank you. Won't you come in?"

He followed her, making the big room seem crowded. When she sat on the shabby couch, he pulled one of the straight chairs up before it. "I would've come back last night, but Goldie talked me out of it. She felt sure that hombre who made me bring you here had come from your father—said that was the only way he could have recognized you and been so sure of himself. I was worried, but I didn't want to barge in and spoil anything your Dad might be working out. Figured he'd want to get in touch with you before he headed for the border, so you'd know where he was."

She shook her head. "No. He hadn't seen Dad in weeks. All he told me was that he didn't like you and thought I'd be better off here. His name's Brad Hudson and I guess he's what he said—a saddle tramp."

Riordan's dark face flushed, but he grinned. "A lot of people don't like Foot Riordan—that's what they call me because of my shoes. I started wearing boots like this when I was just a kid. Now I keep on doing it because everybody expects it."

Lissa smiled and waited. His eyes told her that her statements concerning Hudson had convinced him she had been completely honest. "I wish I could set things right for you," he said. "A girl like you—why, you ought to have the whole world. Guess you know you're beautiful, Lissa."

"The only thing I want to know right now is that my father's safe. Once I find him I'll also find a way to prove he didn't kill Harry Whalen."

"Lissa," Riordan hitched his chair closer and his great body swayed toward her. "You're sure he's innocent, aren't you?"

"Of course."

"Then—" he paused and one big hand lifted, touched her shoulder carefully—"if I figure out a way to prove he didn't have anything to do with Whalen's killing . . . would there be a chance for me?"

Her lips broke apart and for a second her breath halted. The surface of his eyes was stirring, showing the darkness behind it. "A chance of what?"

"With you." His hand, still on her shoulder, was closing and she stiffened, knowing that in a second it would be a grasping demanding grip. "I'll play showdown with you. Soon as I saw you yesterday, I wanted you. I don't think I'll ever be able to look at another woman, now, so I've got to marry you. Things'll be right for you, too. I've got plenty of money and I'll have more. Enough for anything you want."

THE big fingers were closing, digging into her flesh and she started to her feet. But she checked herself and settled back into the chair. Maybe Riordan was no worse than any other man in this country where violence fought strength and made its own laws.

"How'll you show Dad didn't shoot his partner? Unless you can find the man who did—"

"Leave that to me and—"

A booted foot struck the single step outside the cabin door and Lissa leaped up. The door opened and Brad Hudson looked in at them. "Howdy, Riordan. Saw your

horse in the yard and thought I'd ride back to town with you. Left my pony on the trail."

He looked lean and young, against the light. The guns at his thighs almost as bright as his spotless Stetson.

"Listen, son," Riordan's voice was harsh. "When you don't like a man you don't take friendly rides with him—at least I don't. Your saddle's getting cold."

"That's just what I wanted to talk about—why I don't like you, Foot. Let's go."

He did not move but there was that poised readiness about him and the strapped down guns. "Maybe it'll be kind of interesting at that." Riordan shoved back his chair. "To make things even, better take a look at my iron. I've got a lot of 'em and this is one you're not taking."

He crossed the room with his long, rolling strides and at the door, turned to tell Lissa: "Remember what I said because I'm starting to work on it as soon as I reach town."

She watched Brad, who had not spoken to her, walk to his pony and wait for Riordan. They rode down the trail together and she remember Foot telling Brad: "It'll be kind of interesting. To make things even you'd better take a look at my iron."

But nothing would happen to Hudson. He was too experienced a "gunnie" for that, and in spite of Riordan's size, he seemed soft beside the slighter, leaner man.

Brad returned at dusk. She had not heard the approach of a pony or a sound of any kind until the sudden quiet knock at the door.

Her hand closed over the butt of the gun Hudson had given her and holding it close to her side, she went to answer. He pulled off the light Stetson and stepped into the room. "Howdy." He dropped the hat on a chair and demanded: "Don't you think that's really a hat? When we broke out of jail that night, I lost mine so I went to the general store for a new one—the lock on the door was no good. One shot and I had my hat."

"That's one way of—shopping. Won't you sit down?"

"Sure." Light laughed up into his hazel glance and he sat beside her on the leather couch.

She straightened and because warmth was sweeping up her throat to her lips reminding her of the pulsing fire which had once touched them, she said: "My father was here last night. He told me how he met you and how much you've helped him."

"Yeah. That's why I'm here. He's not coming tonight. It might be dangerous with Foot Riordan riding in and out."

When she did not speak, he said: "I guess your Dad explained how I happened to be in the *juzgado*."

"Yes." If he weren't sitting beside her, so close that the skirt of her dress brushed against him, she wouldn't feel this way. She wouldn't want to look at his mouth or see how his red hair caught the light.

"Then I think everything's taken care of. Your Dad didn't want you to worry when he didn't show up. I'll be around, though. Our hideout's not far away."

"Wait—" Her hand lifted and touched his arm as if to hold him back. "I'd like to know more about your being in that jail. I mean, the beginning of the things which put you there."

"Why?"

"Maybe it would help me to—understand?"

He was silent. Still for a moment and then he took her hands and lifted her to her feet. "Any reason to want to understand about me?" he asked, and the points of light were pressing against the surface of his eyes.

"I'm not sure." How could she be sure of anything when he was touching her? When his weathered, muscular hands were holding her?

"Then it's not important." And as the words ended, his mouth found hers, marking it with that faint, pulsing fire which grew until she swayed against him, her hands lifting to his face.

"But it is," she whispered when the kiss ended. "People—men—change. Love might change them."

His lips took hers, swiftly, as if he wanted to stop her words. His arms tightened, held her closer, but he said abruptly: "Nothing changes a bad hombre, Lissa. . . . Not even love. Instead it changes love into something else."

She lifted her head to look up into his eyes. "Maybe that's not true—"

HER words were cut off by the crash of the door which had been thrust open so violently that it slammed against the wall. Goldie Jones, her metallic hair disheveled, her mouth grotesque, stared at them with furious eyes. But then the fury died and she looked from one to the other in confused bewilderment. "Foot's not here—" she said, as if speaking to herself. "I have to find him but I didn't want to find him here."

"What's the matter?" Lissa demanded.

Goldie sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands. "I was sure Foot would be here—he practically told me he was through with me—if I'd found him with you I think I'd have given Slim a chance at him. He's spoiled everything. Slim Thurston's at my place, waiting for him. I sneaked away to find him because Slim says Foot took Dave Eubanks to the sheriff and had him swear it was Thurston who killed Harry Whalen. The sheriff's already organized a posse to hunt Slim—"

"Hold on." Brad went to Goldie and put his hand on her shoulder. "You're not making sense."

"Maybe not." She dropped her hands and let them see her ravaged face. "It doesn't make any difference. It's over for me any how. Foot told me that as plain as he dared. As soon as he saw Lissa he wanted her and started to get rid of me—just as he gets rid of anyone he doesn't need any longer. It was Foot who had Harry Whalen killed. He knew about the ore specimens in the assayer's office and had Dave Eubanks who's on his payroll do some drinking with Whalen in the saloon.

"Then they went out to the mine together and Slim Thurston followed them. Circled through the hills behind the cabin and came down through the brush. When Eubanks tripped Whalen, Thurston shot him—from the brush. Dave knocked out Lissa's father, tied him up and went for the sheriff."

"What was Thurston's stake?"

"Money. A small share in the mine after Foot got it. He knew Lissa was coming out to live with her father. Jake Nansen had told everybody about it, so he was waiting when she arrived. Even after her Dad had broken out of jail, he was sure of putting the deal over. He figured Nansen was sure to be caught. So, he intended, after Lissa'd been here a few days to offer her money for her father's share in the claim. Even if he wasn't caught and mobbed, he couldn't come back to work the mine, so she would be glad to take what money was offered. Maybe it wouldn't have been as legal as some of his deals but he would've handled it without any trouble."

Brad straightened up and turning past Lissa, moved swiftly for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To Goldie's place. I'll take Slim Thurston in to the sheriff and then I'll locate Foot. Things are just about cleaned up—or will be before morning."

"Ye-es." She went to him, walking slowly. "And then what? Is this good-by?"

"Oh, no. I'll be back so we can finish our discussion of bad hombres."

"But you said—"

"Sure. I was talking of outlaws, honey. A lot of people might call me a 'bad hombre' for reasons of their own, but I've always stayed inside the law."

"You're trying to be funny—or cruel," Lissa said.

His arms went around her. "I wasn't in jail because I'd actually stolen that cattle, Lissa. It was arranged for me to be put into jail, although even the sheriff didn't know that. I told you Riordan's been grabbing mines for a long time—sometimes after the owners were killed. The Federal Department of Mines sent me out to get the truth and nab him when I had enough evidence."

Her deeply blue eyes opened very wide. "But you told Dad you'd been in and out of jail for years!"

"Sure. I couldn't take a chance on telling anyone the truth. People talk sometimes, before they think."

He kissed her again, his lips light and warm against hers. "I'll be back as soon as I've turned Thurston and Riordan over to the sheriff."

She drew him back to her, swiftly. "That may not be so easy. Promise you'll be careful? Because you've got to come back."

"I'll do more, darling. I'll promise to be here in the morning."

She let him go then and felt no touch of fear, for she knew that he would keep his promise. He would return.

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK

By Myrtle Juliette Corey

AVOCADO SALAD

made in the following manner is particularly tasty with Mexican food. Blend one cup of olive oil with half a cup of vinegar and add a finely chopped clove of garlic. Into this put three peeled and sliced avocados and allow them to soak overnight. Drain and serve on lettuce or chicory leaves with this French style dressing. Pour into a small jar six tablespoons of oil and two of vinegar. Add half a teaspoon of salt and a quarter of a teaspoon of paprika. Cover and shake thoroughly, to blend. If you desire a flavor of garlic, use the oil and vinegar in which the avocados were soaked.

SOPAIPILLAS (Fried Puffs)

may be served with coffee or chocolate, or as a dessert, by adding a sauce. They are well worth the small trouble of making them as you will discover if you try. A certain pretty little *senora,* a recent bride, gained great popularity in the camp where her soldier husband was in training, because she served these tempting puffs with coffee, when his friends dropped in. To make them, sift together four cups of flour, one teaspoon of baking powder and three quarters of a teaspoon of salt. Beat two eggs thoroughly, adding to them one cup of milk. Stir in the dry ingredients, adding as much more flour as the liquid will absorb. Roll the dough as thin as possible and cut into small squares, frying these in deep fat. Drain on paper.

For the sauce, combine six tablespoons of sugar and half a teaspoon of cinnamon, adding to half a cup of water and a cup of wine. Stir in half a cup of seeded raisins and boil until the mixture thickens. Pour over the *sopaipillas* and serve immediately. By the way, this sauce is delicious on plain boiled rice.

(Please continue on page 92)

RIVER-BOAT PICKUP

CHAPTER ONE

Kissing Takes Two

By Bill Severn

Mark rasped: "Are you trying to drive me crazy?" Willow laughed gayly. "Yes."

♥ ♥ ♥

As long as Honkatonk-girl Willow had to hide out on a river boat, she decided to make the dull voyage as lively as possible — for stuffy Captain Taylor . . . and the very, very toplofty Gloria.

♥ ♥ ♥

THE steamer *Eagle Belle* churned its way up the glassy Missouri in the sun, fighting a strong wind. At the front deck railing, embarrassed by the wind, stood Willow Latrobe, as supple as the tree for which she was named; tall, golden-haired and lovely. The wind had trapped her in the full sun, pressed against the railing, and the red in her cheeks was deep.

Willow held the open parasol in one hand and clutched her buff taffeta skirt with the other hand. She knew if she moved from the railing the wind would play wild tag with her skirt again. And Willow also knew that the young captain of the *Eagle Belle,* Mark Taylor, was not giving as much attention to the river as he pretended, standing there beside the wheel house.

But she couldn't wait forever. Helplessly, Willow lifted both hands to close the parasol. *Woo-sh!* The wind tagged her

skirt as if it had been waiting for just that second. Willow dropped her left hand again and hugged the railing, her back to the captain, her face crimson.

She heard his soft laugh and then his footsteps on the deck beside her. "You look like you need help." He reached up and took the parasol, closed it.

With both hands free, Willow hugged her skirt to her sides and moved quickly out of the path of the wind. "You might have offered to help before," she told him, "instead of just standing there."

"Sorry." Mark grinned. "I didn't notice you before." His eyes teasingly admitted he was lying. They were blue eyes, clear from looking into the distance, but concentrated now entirely upon her. "You're

Willow Latrobe, aren't you? Booked for Liberation Landing?"

Beside her Mark looked taller than he had yesterday when Willow first had seen him on the deck, shouting orders as the *Eagle Belle* pulled away from the dock at Larkin. Even then, he had seemed a tanned and sandy-haired giant.

"Do you take such a personal interest in all your passengers, captain?"

"I like to know who's aboard—and why." He frowned slightly. "You're sort of young to be traveling the river alone."

Willow's head jerked up. "I've been traveling alone most of my life. I can take care of myself."

What a long and lonely road she had traveled, fighting her own way since her folks died in the 'flu epidemic when she was twelve. Willow had walked that road the hard way, battling the temptations of the frontier, growing woman-wise while she was still a child.

One odd job after another had kept her alive. And now this job, the opportunity to escape from Larkin. True, she still would be a waitress. But from the glowing way the persuasive Duke Mareno talked during his visit to Larkin, his Eldorado Hotel at Liberation Landing must be quite an exclusive place.

Mareno had promised her, in the letter he had written later, that she would have an opportunity for better pay. He had been so urgently in need of help, he had paid her steamboat fare in advance when Willow signed the bond to work for him. And he was such a gentleman, so polished and polite. Expectantly, Willow looked forward to meeting Duke Mareno again at Liberation Landing.

"I hope you *can* take care of yourself," Mark said now. "I don't want trouble aboard my ship."

"Trouble?"

His eyebrows pulled in. "You're one of Duke Mareno's girls aren't you?"

Willow glanced up, surprised by his tone. "I'm going to work for Mr. Mareno, if that's what you mean."

"That's exactly what I mean."

A shadow fell across them and Willow turned. A small, dark-haired girl with a pouting mouth stopped beside Mark and possessively took his arm. "You promised to come to the lounge, Mark, as soon as the mate had the channel course set," the girl said.

"I'm sorry, Gloria." Mark made a smile for her and patted her hand. "I was tied up with—something."

"So I see." Gloria glanced at the tiny gold watch pinned to the bosom of her dress. "You've been a long time." Her cold look told Willow clearly: *Hands off! Mark is mine!* Then Gloria laughed up at him. "You naughty boy."

WILLOW made a face and swung around. *Naughty boy!* She stormed the length of the deck to her cabin, slammed the door and sat on the edge of the bunk. "You can keep him," she said, half-aloud. "I certainly don't want any part of him."

She brushed out her hair so the gold sparkled in it and went to the dining cabin for lunch. Gloria was at the captain's table. Mark's glance lifted across the room to Willow. It was a puzzled look.

Pretending she didn't see him, Willow chose an empty chair at the long table on the opposite side of the room. A short, rather stout man stood and bowed. "Allow me." He pulled out the chair for Willow.

Conscious that Mark was watching, she smiled deliberately and thanked the man beside her. He introduced himself as Lawrence Coke and Willow told him who she was. "I'm selling leather goods," Coke said.

Willow took another look. He was a typical drummer. Store clothes, stiff collar. He seemed harmless enough. As they ate, she told him she worked at Duke Mareno's Eldorado Hotel.

Coke's attitude changed. He moved his chair closer and smiled warmly and said, "Well!"

Well, what? Willow wondered. Looking up, she saw Mark still watching her with that queer expression. The dining cabin was stuffy and noisy. The river passengers were a cross-section of the frontier, as if someone had taken a knife and cut a slice of humanity: drummers like Coke, tourists, cowhands in their plaid shirts and sun-faded jeans, merchants, gamblers—even a clergyman, hot and uneasy in dusty clericals.

"We'll make good time this trip." Coke

nodded toward Gloria at the captain's table. "That's the Paddleboat Princess. Her pa, old Bart Durkin, owns the line. Besides, she's the captain's fiancee, so he's showing off for her. This run to Independence is his last trip." He laughed meaningly. "Not so bad, eh? Marrying the boss' daughter and getting himself a nice soft berth ashore?"

So that was why Mark was so concerned about the possibility of trouble aboard the *Eagle Belle*. But why had he singled out her for a warning? What trouble did he expect Willow to cause?

"Shall we get some air?" Coke stood and pulled out her chair.

"It is—stuffy in here."

They went to the deck and Willow took a chair well back from the wind. She had hardly seated herself when Mark came through the door from the dining cabin behind them.

Mark gave Willow a half-amused look, but his eyes were entirely serious as he turned to Coke. "You're carrying a lot of money, Coke." Mark clipped the direct words. "Don't you think it would be better if I kept it in the ship's safe for you?"

The drummer got up, his face red. "Why—I guess—" Flustered, he glanced at Willow. "Yes," Coke decided awkwardly. "I guess it would be—safer."

Mark nodded. "Come along with me."

Angrily, Willow stood up. "Are you making out that I—"

"Nice try, waif." The half-amusement came back to Mark's eyes. "But I warned you this kind of thing was no go on my ship."

Willow's breath drew sharp and her cheeks flamed. "You mean you think—I was going to—steal his money?"

"Shall we go to my cabin, Coke?" Mark grinned.

"Yes." The drummer looked cautiously, half-apologetically, at Willow again and swallowed hard. "Yes. . . . Thank you."

Stunned, Willow watched them go up the deck. For a moment, she was too angry to move. *How dare Mark think such a thing!*

Fuming, she went forward. She pounded on the cabin door. It swung open and Coke came out, side-stepping away from her without a word as he hurried off.

Hands on her hips, Willow stood in the doorway. "I think," she said to Mark's back as he adjusted the knob of the safe, "you'd better apologize, captain. And you'd better be quick about it!"

Mark turned. "Are you threatening to stir up trouble between me and Duke Mareno?"

"I'll stir more than trouble! How dare you accuse me of being a—thief?"

"Maybe not." Mark grinned. "And then again—I'm not taking chances."

"Oh!"

He laughed. "You can stow that innocent look. I'm no greenhorn. I've been making this run five years and I know a river waif when I meet one." He made a mock bow. "No offense intended. Just so's we understand each other. Now, let's both forget it."

"Forget it?" Willow took two angry steps, stood in front of him. "It'll be a long time before you forget this, Mark Taylor—I promise you that!"

Mark laughed again. "You *are* beautiful." Suddenly, his arms took her. "When you're mad like that, you're—"

His kiss was hard. His arms tightened even more as Willow struggled, twisting, turning, pounding her tiny fists upon his chest. The way he held her hurt, but his laughter was teasing and almost gentle.

The anger that blazed to Willow's lips met another fire there as Mark kissed her again. Weakly, her hands clung to him. Exhausted by the spent denial, she stopped fighting.

It was Mark who took his arms away. He stepped back from Willow, surprise in his eyes, bewilderment. The little half-smile that touched his lips fluttered away in confusion.

Blindly, Willow found her way through the door, ran down the deck to her own cabin, slammed that door behind her.

She flung herself on the bunk and pounded her fists against the wooden frame of it, as she had pounded them at Mark. Her fingers gripped the edge of the bunk. "Damn you!" she whispered. "Damn you!"

CHAPTER TWO

Lady, Beware!

WILLOW lay on the bunk, half-sick from the thrumming vibration of the *Eagle Belle,* but far sicker with humiliation. Outside, the river was dark. Silver moonlight shimmered upon it, mocking her with its beauty.

She was hungry and too ashamed to go to the dining cabin for supper. The drummer, Lawrence Coke, would be there. Undoubtedly, the other passengers had heard about the incident by now. And Mark. Mark would be with Gloria.

But why had they all been so ready to accuse her, so ready to believe almost anything about her?

A knock on the cabin door cut off her thoughts. "Who—is it?" Instinctively, Willow rubbed her hands to her eyes.

"Mark."

She sat up. Her lips tightened and she tried to sound angry. "Go away!"

"I brought you something to eat," he said. "You must be hungry." He paused. "I want to talk to you, Willow."

"I don't want to talk to you."

He was silent a minute. "All right. . . . I'll leave the food here."

She heard his boots on the deck, walking away. She waited. She *was* hungry.

Cautiously, Willow unbolted the door. She leaned down quickly and lifted the tray.

But not quickly enough. Mark stepped out of the shadow into the box of light from the door. "There's something I've got to know. . . . It's important."

She barred the door with the tray, her fingers trembling so the dishes rattled. "Nothing you have to say is important—"

"This is." Mark moved her arm aside. He stepped in and pulled the door shut behind him, stood with his back to it. "This is important to you—and to me, too."

"How dare you force your way in here?" She put the shaking tray on the bunk. "If you don't get out, I'll—"

"Please, Willow. . . ."

Something in his pleading look made her hesitate momentarily. But her head lifted with quick pride and her smile was taunting. "Do you want me to yell? Do you want—Gloria to know you're here?"

"You won't." He clipped the words with sudden decision. "I want to know—how long have you been working for Duke Mareno?"

"That," Willow told him frostily, "is none of your business."

"I'm making it my business." Mark took a step. His hands touched her shoulders. "Tell me, Willow."

She looked down. "I don't work for him—yet," she said slowly. "I'm on my way there to take a job as a waitress." Her eyes lifted questioningly. "Why do you say his name like that? What does all this—"

"Oh, Willow—Willow—" Mark hugged her close. His lips gently touched her cheek. "I knew it," he whispered. "I was sure—when I kissed you back there in my cabin."

"You knew what, Mark? . . . What are you saying?"

Tenderly, he moved her away from him, his hands still upon her shoulders. "It's no place for you to work," he said. "The Eldorado is a gambling house, a honkatonk."

Willow's face went red. "But Mr. Mareno said it was a high-class hotel. He told me—" She shook her head. "Oh, no. You must be thinking of some other place. He's *such* a gentleman."

"*Gentleman!* Duke Mareno is the worst pirate along the river. His joint is notorious from Independence to New Orleans. Working for him is like wearing an outlaw brand. You can't work there, Willow—you must promise me that."

"But what will I do? I have no job. I can't go back to Larkin."

Mark's arms took her again. "We'll figure that out." He said it softly and he waited for her to look up. His kiss was very gentle.

Moonlight coming through the tiny porthole coaxed them. Mark turned out the cabin lamp. Holding Willow's arm around him, he led her to the deck.

Across the black water, the moon's silver washed to the low-hanging trees on the shore and the branches reached out to catch it, branches like huge silken nets in the wind. Willow's hair kept some of the silver, too. The moonlight spilled upon her mouth and filled her eyes.

The gentle movement of the boat was like the rocking of a cradle, a cradle of newborn dreams, and the steady churn of the paddles was a lullaby too beautiful to spoil with words.

Their shadows danced together on the water, out away from the boat and back again, close, until the shadows were one. They said no words. Standing together, Mark held her hand and Willow let her own hand talk to him the language lovers have spoken in silence, discovering love, since Creation's: "Let there be night!"

Mark turned her to him, looked down and found her lips, her eyes. He held her a long minute, until it was too much for both of them to be apart that close. His kiss closed her eyes.

"Well!" The voice broke upon them harshly. Gloria. She laughed.

Mark turned dazedly. Willow blinked.

Gloria smiled tightly. *Smiled!* "You won your bet," she said to Mark. "But I didn't ask you to prove it."

"Bet?" Willow backed from Mark. "What does she mean?"

Gloria laughed again. "Mark bet me any man could kiss you. One of Duke Mareno's girls, he said, would do—"

"Mark. . . ." His name died on Willow's lips as she tried to say it. Everything he had told her, all the things he had said about the Eldorado, were part of this—this bitter prank. "Oh, Mark, you couldn't have—"

"It wasn't like that, Willow." He reached for her hand. "I made the bet this morning, before I—"

"You did bet her?" Willow forced the words.

"Yes, in a joking sort of way. But that was before I knew the truth about you. That was—"

"Come on, darling." Gloria took his arm. "You've had your fun."

"Willow. . . ."

She turned to her cabin, wrenched open the door. She closed it tight behind her.

Mark pounded on the door. "Willow, you must listen to me. I meant what I said about Duke Mareno's. You can't work there. Willow—"

The pounding stopped. The night was as silent as the locked door between them. . . .

Weary-eyed from the sleepless night, Willow waited in her cabin until the *Eagle Belle* warped to the dock at Liberation Landing.

Shouting orders to the stevedores who were straining with the lines on the dock below, Mark turned as soon as he saw Willow. He clipped orders to the mate to take over and strode forward. "You can't go ashore here," he said.

Willow fixed the smile hard first, then turned it upon him. "What I do, captain, is strictly none of your business."

"But—"

"Working at the Eldorado Hotel is my job—and I'm going to take it."

Mark's lips tightened. "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you are the type who would work for Duke Mareno."

Willow held the smile until it hurt. "Maybe you were," she said. She even laughed. "It could be I was having my little joke, too." Head high, she walked to the gangplank. "You'd better run along, captain. Gloria might get jealous. Then what would happen to that precious job her father's going to give you?"

"Willow!"

"Thank you—for an amusing trip." She turned toward the dock. "There's Mr. Mareno, waiting for me now."

Willow went down the gangplank, feeling Mark's look burn into her back.

When she glanced up, Gloria was beside him at the rail of the boat, holding his arm. But Mark looked straight ahead at Willow, stared at her, deeply confused.

Willow lifted her hand, waved casually, her smile teasing. She turned away and walked swiftly to Mareno before the hard smile broke from the pain of carrying it so far.

CHAPTER THREE

"It's a Long Swim Home!"

SHE still couldn't believe all that Mark had said about Duke Mareno. Even if it were partly true, she wasn't afraid. She knew how to take care of herself.

Mareno seemed as polite as he had in Larkin. "This is a good town," he said, pointing out the stores to Willow as he drove the wagon away from the dock. "And I run it."

He smiled as he said it, but Willow

sensed a not too subtle meaning behind Duke Mareno's words. It was as if he were warning her that she would take orders from him.

He'd find out about that. She wasn't taking orders from any man. Making a smile that matched his, Willow said: "It was nice of you to meet me at the boat."

"I treat my girls right." He leaned closer and patted her hand. "Besides, I had a special interest in seeing that you arrived safely."

Willow moved her hand. She pointed. "What's that—over there?"

"The new jail." Mareno stiffened. "Not that Sheriff Benson and his crowd get to use it much."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you—I'm the law here."

Liberation Landing was a raw river town, wood and canvas and mud. Looking at the main street as the wagon jolted along the rut that served as a road, Willow had the impression that someone had spilled it here and hadn't bothered to mop up the edges.

From the crowds on the board planking in front of the jerry-built stores she sensed that plenty of money was being spent in Liberation Landing, too. It was a supply center for wagons going west, a loud, rough, last-spree community.

"Here we are." Mareno pulled tight the reins.

For a minute, Willow couldn't believe it. The Eldorado Hotel was as unfinished as the town. A large, barn-like building of unpainted timber, surrounded by a dozen log cabins and half a dozen more canvas tents. "This?"

Mareno swung down, his boots sinking into the mud. He lifted his arms to Willow. "I'll carry you to the steps."

Hesitating, she looked at the mud. She let him lift her into his arms.

Mareno's hold was too tight and he kept her in his arms longer than he needed to after they reached the plank porch. Willow thought again of Mark's warning and she didn't feel nearly so sure of herself as she had.

The shiver of premonition tightened along her spine as Mareno led her through the lobby into a huge room flanked by gambling layouts. A mirror-backed bar ran along one entire wall. There were small tables and a space cleared for dancing.

"You'll live in one of the cabins out back," Mareno said. "I'll send Fannie over to tell you how we work."

Willow kept her eyes down so he wouldn't see the growing fright in them. "My things haven't come from the boat yet."

"Don't worry about that. All the waitresses here wear—uh—uniforms."

The cabin was as raw and unfinished as the rest of the Eldorado. A single bed and a table, a wash basin and a cracked mirror.

Willow bolted the door. "Mark," she whispered aloud. "Oh, Mark—why didn't I listen to you?"

There was a knock on the door. Willow jumped. "Who—is it?"

A blurred feminine voice answered: "Open up, dearie. It's Fannie."

Reluctantly, Willow shoved back the bolt.

The woman was older than Willow. Most of the age was in her eyes and in the hard lines of her face. Her lips were scarlet and her hair was frizzed at the ends. "I brought your duds."

N FANNIE'S arm was a brief black tulle and red velvet dress with a rhinestone bodice. She dropped it on the bed and told Willow in a rapid, sing-song voice: "You coax them to buy drinks and try to spot the money. When you want a sucker fixed with a knockout so the boys can take his roll, sit with your legs crossed to the left. And no filching part of the take. You'll get your cut when we—"

"I came here as a waitress," Willow said, shocked. "I won't do anything like that."

Fannie took a menacing step toward her. "You're here now—and it's a long swim home. You'll do what you're told." She grinned and her breath was heavy with the smell of liquor. "That way, you won't get hurt."

"No! You can't keep me here. I won't—"

"Get into your duds," Fannie snapped. "We start as soon as it's dark." She went to the door. "And don't waste time trying to make a break for it, dearie. Duke runs this town. There's no place you can go." She slammed the door behind her.

Numbly, Willow sat on the bed, fingering

the brief costume Fannie had brought her. She would have to pretend she was playing along with Mareno until she could find a way to escape.

Willow changed into the costume. She could see only her face in the cracked mirror, but she could feel the way the rest of the costume must look. It was so scanty Willow felt cold in it, even with the cabin door shut tightly against the evening chill.

But wearing it was part of the game of playing up to Duke Mareno until she found a way out. She would have to throw Mareno off guard until she could get word to Mark. The *Eagle Belle* would be tied to the dock to put ashore cargo until tomorrow morning. Somehow, before then, she *would* find a way.

The lamps went on in the big building and the music started, a hurdy-gurdy piano tinkling monotonously above the swelling hum of talk and laughter. Head high, shoulders set, Willow crossed from the cabin to the main building of the Eldorado, shivering with cold again as the wind goose-pimpled her lovely legs.

She went in the rear door. There was a sudden hush among the crowd immediately around her and she felt the men's eyes upon her. Somebody laughed low. Another man whistled. Mareno came through the crowd then, smiling. He took her arm. "Boys—this is Willow."

They called back her name, laughing, waving to her.

"I'm glad you're playing it smart," Mareno whispered. His face was close. "I thought I might have trouble with you. But you're not so dumb."

Willow whipped him a brave, quick smile and wished she could feel as strong as the bravado she put into her voice. "Not dumb at all—Duke."

His dark eyes lighted with welcome surprise. He patted her hand. "Just dance with them and let them buy you drinks. Stick close to Fannie. She'll show you the ropes."

Willow danced with the men and sat with them and laughed with them, parrying their advances with the same hard smile tacked on her lips. And, all the while, she watched the door, a prayer close beneath that pretending smile. "*Mark . . . Mark. . .*"

She saw Lawrence Coke, the drummer for the leather goods firm, come in. Fannie quickly took his arm and led him away to a table.

Willow danced with a bearded miner. A cowhand impetuously asked her to marry him and go with him to his ranch near Santa Fe. Willow escaped him and found herself standing before a gray-haired, square-shouldered man wearing a double brace of guns.

He lifted his arms to dance with her. "You're new here." It was a statement, not a question.

Willow nodded. Glancing over the man's shoulder, she saw Mareno, standing at the door to his office. He gave Willow a sharp look of warning. "Yes," she told her partner wearily. "I just came in today."

"You came to the wrong place, girl."

Willow looked up quickly. "What makes you say that?"

"I'm Sheriff Benson. This place and all that goes with it are on the way out. The decent folks won't stand for Duke Mareno. We're building a city here. Liberation Landing has grown out of being just a wild wagon camp."

"Sheriff." Willow gripped his arm. Conscious that Mareno was watching her intently, she put her head on the sheriff's shoulder, dropped her voice to a whisper. Quickly, she asked Benson to get word to Mark that she had to see him.

A hand grasped Willow's arm before she had finished explaining to the sheriff. It was Fannie. "Duke wants you," Fannie rasped, pulling Willow away from Benson.

The sheriff's puzzled look questioned Willow. Desperately, her eyes pleaded with him to deliver her message. Praying inwardly that Benson understood the urgency of her request, Willow crossed the room to Mareno's office.

"What did he want?" Mareno nodded toward the sheriff as Benson went out the batwing doors.

Willow put on the tight smile again. "Tried to scare me—about you."

"Yeah?" Mareno's narrowing eyes searched hers.

Willow forced the laugh. "I don't scare that easily."

Mareno laughed, too, then. "You stick with me. We'll do all right together." His glance ran over her slowly. "Maybe we can make a better deal for pay than what we

have in writing. Later, we'll have a little talk."

"Anytime—Duke." Willow wished she were half as sure of herself as she made the words sound. She went back to the tables.

AWRENCE COKE asked her to drink with him. He explained that he was embarrassed about what had happened on the ship. "I am carrying a lot of money." Coke tapped his shirt pocket. "And I reckon I was frightened for a minute when the captain put it like that. But I know you wouldn't try to rob me, would you, Willow?"

She shook her head. "Thank you," she said softly, "for trusting me."

Watching the door for Mark, Willow saw Benson come back. Her glance lifted prayerfully to the sheriff, asking if he had delivered the message to Mark. Slowly, Benson shook his head, 'no.'

Willow's heart sank. Absently, she went on talking to Coke, saying words, laughing with him. But her mind was dead. If Mark didn't come to help her—

Unconsciously, nervously, Willow crossed her legs.

A waiter appeared almost immediately with fresh drinks, winked at Willow significantly. Too late, she realized she had given the signal to have the drinks doped for a knockout.

She stood quickly. "I'll be back," she told Coke.

Hurriedly, Willow went to Mareno's office. "I made a mistake. You'll have to stop your men. I—gave the signal for—"

"What's wrong?" Mareno interrupted. "The sucker hasn't any money?"

"He has money, but—" The words choked. She couldn't pretend any longer. "I can't go through with a thing like this. Robbing him. Coke came here to show me he trusted me and—"

"I trusted you, too." Mareno's eyes narrowed. "I thought you were going to play along with me." He took a step. "Don't go soft on me, Willow."

Mareno's arms took her suddenly, roughly. He pulled her close. His arms hurt and his kiss was cruel.

"No!" Willow backed from him, edged around the table.

Mareno caught her. Laughing, he kissed her again.

Willow lashed out at him. She kicked at his shins. She pounded him with her fists, clawed her fingers. Mareno laughed louder, kissed with her harder.

Weakly helpless, Willow waited in his arms, hating him but powerless to break free.

The door slammed open. Mareno's arms fell. "What the hell do you want?"

Willow turned. "Mark!"

Mark stood in the doorway. His eyes leaped from Mareno to Willow.

"Oh, Mark!" She ran to him. "Benson did reach you. You were so right about—" Her words died against his immobile expression.

Mark's glance flickered to her scanty costume, the disarray of her hair. His mouth twisted into a tight, knowing grin, "You can save the act, Willow," he said. "I don't know why you bother making a play for me. I'm no sucker you can take over the ropes for his money."

"Mark!" She looked up in disbelief. "I sent Benson for you so that—"

"Benson?"

"The sheriff. I had to reach—"

"I didn't see anybody."

"Then—why did you come?"

Mark looked again at her dress. His glance lifted to Mareno. "That," Mark said, "doesn't matter—now."

He swung on his heel and walked out.

"So." Mareno moved between Willow and the door as she tried to follow Mark. "Playing *me* for a sucker?" He grasped Willow's wrist. "You thought he'd get you out of here, eh?"

"Mark," she whispered. "Mark. . . ."

"He can't help you now." Mareno flung her wrist away. "You're one of Duke Mareno's girls—and you'd better get used to it." He pointed. "Get back to work. And don't try running to the sheriff. Benson talks big, but there's nothing he can do, either. You signed a paper to work here for me. I paid your fare and I'll pay your wages and the law's on my side. And any law that ain't—I'll change!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Shadows in the Night

THE main building was quiet now. Willow lay on her bed in her cabin behind the Eldorado. The lamps were out and the piano had stopped. The river town was asleep, its night of hurdy-gurdy ended. But Willow couldn't sleep.

Still dressed in the filmy tulle gown, she went to the single window. The night was black, without a moon. Standing there, she thought of last night, of the promise there had been then in Mark's nearness.

Absently, Willow turned. A vague motion in the black shrubs beyond the line of the cabins stopped her. Some animal, probably; a jack rabbit or a night bird.

The shadows took shape again. Willow heard a soft whisper. Ear to the window, she heard it again. Her name. "Willow!"

She hurried to the door, slipped the bolt, the pulses jumping in her wrists and her heart pounding. She tiptoed into the clearing and whispered, just as softly, "Here."

The shadow moved. *It was Mark!*

"Maybe I'm a fool," he said, close to her now. "But I had to come back."

"Mark. . ." Willow hugged herself to him. "Take me with you."

"Darling." His arms tightened. "But why did you—"

Her fingers touched his lips. "Later. They'll hear us."

Crouching, they moved catlike to the street. Willow walked behind him in the shadow of the buildings, stopping when Mark did to make sure they weren't seen or heard. They faced the open space between the tag row of stores and the dock where the *Eagle Belle* was tied. "Quick now," he said. They ran.

Silently, Mark helped her aboard. Willow followed him along the deck to his cabin. He shut the door behind her. "We can't risk a light."

"Oh, Mark—"

He kissed her. "I couldn't leave you there. Even when I saw you, dressed like this, I couldn't believe you—"

"I had to wear this to play up to Mareno until there was some way to get free. You were so right about him." Remembering, she shuddered.

"It doesn't matter now, darling." Mark's lips found hers again. "You're safe. We sail at dawn." His arms hugged her. "You stay hidden here. I'll sleep in the wheel house."

Mark went to the door. "Lock it behind me, Willow. Don't open it for anyone."

She hesitated a moment. "Mark—what about—Gloria?"

He grinned. "Gloria," he said slowly, "will be very angry."

Their lips touched and he was gone. Willow watched him until his shadow was lost in the darkness. But she didn't feel alone now.

Smiling, she lay down. In a few minutes, she was asleep. It was a wonderful dream. And, even dreaming, she knew it was true.

A shout awoke her. Willow sat up with a start. Discovering herself still in the dance dress, she was momentarily afraid. Then she remembered and the sure smile came back.

But the shout sounded again. She went to the porthole. It was almost light outside, the gray of false dawn. On the shore stood Sheriff Benson and two of his men. Beside him was the drummer, Lawrence Coke.

Willow saw Mark at the railing. He cupped his hands: "What's wrong?"

Sheriff Benson gestured toward Coke and shouted back: "This man's been robbed .... One of the Eldorado girls. She disappeared."

Mark's shoulders set. "Which one?"

"The girl who came up the river with you."

Mark hesitated a moment before he called: "She's not here."

Willow's fingers dug into the wooden frame. The shouting had aroused the ship's crew and the passengers still aboard the *Eagle Belle* for the rest of the trip up the river.

A door opened down the deck. Willow's breath caught. It was Gloria. The girl crossed the deck to the railing, stood beside Mark. If she discovered Willow was aboard. . . .

Benson came up the gangplank, his men behind him. "If you don't mind, captain—" he was close enough now so that Willow could hear him plainly—"I'd like to search your ship. We've got Mareno in jail. But we want her, too."

Mark's shoulders lifted. "Suit yourself."

Willow turned back into the cabin, her eyes probing frantically for some place to hide. The bed was built too close to the floor to get under. The closet—but, surely, they would look there. There was a short, low chest against the near wall. Curling like a kitten, Willow climbed into it atop a stack of musty river charts.

It seemed hours before they came into the cabin. Willow held her breath. She heard Mark ask: "Sure you're looking for the right girl, sheriff?"

It was Gloria who answered, laughing at Mark. "Just like a man. Defending her because she was pretty and flirted her eyes at you." Gloria laughed again. "Flirting is a business with girls like Willow."

"And a costly business," Coke chimed in. "Cost me plenty. There's no doubt about it—she was the one. Drinking with her is the last thing I remember before I was robbed."

"We got Mareno this time—even without her, it's a clear case. She wouldn't have run if she wasn't guilty," Benson said. "Reason I'm searching your ship is she was trying to get in touch with you last night, captain—probably aiming to make some kind of a getaway deal with the money."

They went out. Minutes later, Willow heard single footsteps. Knuckles tapped on the cover. "I figured you were there." It was Mark. "You can get out now."

Willow climbed out, brushed her skirt into place. "Thank you, Mark, for—" She saw his expression and the words died. "Mark! You don't believe what they say? You can't believe—"

"They seem to know what they're saying." He looked down. "So, that's why you were so willing to come with me last night. You wanted to get away and you wanted to use me—"

"I wanted to get away," Willow said, watching him with disbelief. "But not because I stole anything." She moved toward him. "If you don't believe me—why did you hide me?"

His glance touched hers. He looked down again. "Maybe it's like Gloria says—I'm just a sucker for a pretty girl—even a crooked one."

Willow's shoulders went back. She strode toward the door.

"Hey! Where are you—"

"I'm going to face the charges. I didn't steal the money."

Mark grasped her arm. "You can't go out there."

"So—it's Gloria you're worried about. You're afraid she'll find out you brought me here." Willow's eyes snapped. "And all the lies you told me—about loving me and—"

"Stop it!" Mark suddenly pulled her into his arms, shook her. "I do love you .... I can't help myself." His mouth was hard.

Willow turned her head. "But—you don't believe me?"

"No."

"Does it make sense to you, Mark," Willow asked softly, "that I would have come with you when Duke Mareno could have fronted for me if I had wanted to—play his game?"

Mark turned to the closet without answering her, pulled out a pair of faded dungarees and an old brown sweater. "You'd better put these on before you catch cold in that—bit of nothing." Mark's eyes flickered to the dress. "We stop for wood at the north side of the river tonight after dark. If you get off there, nobody will see you—I'll make sure the crew is busy." He paused at the door. "This—is good-by, Willow."

CHAPTER FIVE

River Waif's Last Tease

WILLOW stared at the closed door. Hot fury stung her face. *Good-bye, is it? We'll see about that!* Angrily, she changed into the dungarees and sweater. *Nobody's putting me off at any woodpile. I've been pushed around enough.* She rolled up the sleeves of the sweater, jammed her hands into her pockets, fighting mad.

The *Eagle Belle* shivered to the churn of its paddles. Willow paced the cabin, waiting until Liberation Landing was lost down the river. She flung open the door and walked out into the sun.

The passengers blinked at her. Heels pounding, she walked past them up the deck to the wheel house. Mark was there and Gloria with him.

Willow opened the door. "Oh," she pre-

tended surprise. "I thought you'd be alone, Mark, darling."

Gloria fell back, her hand to her throat. "Mark! What does this—mean?"

"Why, I—"

Willow smiled sweetly, too sweetly. "Didn't he tell you?" She tucked her arm under Mark's. "We're going to be married."

"Mark!" Gloria's head came up. She drew in her breath. "This is too much!"

"Now, Gloria—"

"Don't speak to me!" Gloria stormed through the doorway.

Mark turned slowly. "What are you trying to do?"

Willow blinked her eyes at him innocently. "I was hungry."

"You didn't have to come here."

"Is that any way to talk to your future wife?" Willow pouted. She took his arm again.

Nervously, he freed himself. "Go back to my cabin. If the other passengers see you—"

"They have," Willow told him blandly. "And I like it better up here." Teasingly, she moved nearer to him. "It's not so—lonely."

Mark swung around. "Damn you!"

"Why, Mark." Willow laughed. "Such language." She patted his arm. "About that breakfast?"

He frowned. "I'll have the mate—"

"Oh, no," she said. "I'd much rather eat in the dining cabin. I'll wait for you there—darling. At your table."

Willow went back along the deck, smiling at the frozen stares the passengers gave her.

Gloria was at her usual place at the captain's table, her mouth tight. Willow walked straight to the table. "Do you mind moving over?" she asked Gloria. "This is my place now."

"Oh!" Gloria sucked in her breath. She got up and left the room.

Willow ordered a huge breakfast, ate it slowly.

Mark came in finally, scowling. He sat stiffly beside her. "The whole ship's talking," he said. "You've got to stop this acting. What do you want?"

She smiled at him sweetly and passed the corn pones. "You."

Mark dropped his fork. "Now, look here, young lady—" His face was very red.

"Not so loud, dear," Willow said, still smiling. "You're making a scene."

"*I'm* making a scene!" He choked. He stood. His low whisper was harsh. "You get off tonight—when we stop for wood. Understand?"

Willow looked up. "A lot can happen before tonight."

She stood at the deck railing after breakfast, pretending to watch the water, but fully conscious that Mark uncomfortably was watching her the way he had watched that first day as she stood there in the wind. Watching and remembering. Remembering her nearness and her kisses. She knew that Gloria was watching her, too. Gloria would try something. When she did, Willow would be ready.

At lunch, the captain's table was deserted. Willow saw two trays brought out of the kitchen by different waiters. Mark and Gloria were eating separately, alone.

Willow strode to the deck again, walked forward to the wheel house.

Mark jumped when he saw her. "Can't you leave me alone?"

"No," she said simply. "And you don't want me to."

He swore.

Willow moved closer. Her arm touched his. He inched away uneasily. She moved the inch to close the gap between them. "It's such a beautiful day," she sighed. "The sun's as clear as moonlight—remember, Mark?"

Mark grabbed her, rasped: "Are you trying to drive me crazy?"

Willow put her hands on his chest, leaned back, laughing gayly. "Yes."

Then Willow swiftly twisted out of his arms, patted her hand to her mouth, yawning. "I guess I'll take another stroll."

"Willow!" His arms reached again.

She laughed at him, teasing. Quickly, she went out the door.

At the mirror in Mark's cabin, she straightened her hair. *Make a fool of me, will he?* She smiled at herself, pleased. He'd think twice before he put her off the boat. Before the trip was over, Mark would think twice about a lot of things.

The door slammed open. Willow turned. "Mark!"

He shut the door behind him.

"What—do you want?"

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His eyes were tight, his lips set. "I'm calling your bluff," he said.

Frightened, Willow backed against the wall.

He strode across the room. His arms pulled her toward the edge of the bunk. "Tease me, will you?" He sat down, jerked her across his lap, her face to the floor.

"Mark!"

His hand came down hard, spanked her. "Not so sure of yourself now, are you?" His hand connected again. The round *thwack* echoed in the cabin.

There was a sudden shouting on the deck outside. Willow scrambled to her feet. Trembling, she backed from him, flung open the door.

Gloria ran up the deck, brushed past Willow into the cabin, bumping Willow against the frame of the door, where she hurt. "Mark." Gloria went to him. "My gold watch—it's been stolen!"

"Stolen?" He turned. "I don't understand."

"It seems rather obvious," Gloria said. "Everybody knows there's a thief aboard."

Willow looked straight at Mark. "Why don't you say it? Why don't you accuse me?"

His glance wavered. "Are you—sure, Gloria? You didn't misplace it?"

Gloria drew herself up. "Are you doubting my word?"

Mark's face went red. He looked at Willow again. His voice sure, he said slowly: "I don't believe Willow took it."

Willow stepped before him. "Why don't you search me?"

Mark swallowed hard. "You wouldn't have any place to hide it—even if you did take it. And I don't believe you did."

"Don't tell me you're starting to trust me, Mark?" Willow's smile was tight.

"*I'll* search you!" Gloria reached out her hands toward Willow's pockets.

"Like hell you will!" Willow caught her arm, twisted it.

Gloria pulled her forward. They fell hard to the floor. They rolled on the floor, Willow wincing from the soreness Mark had inflicted. She kicked her legs, grabbed Gloria's dress with a ripping motion. The cloth gave. Gloria fell back. Willow pounded Gloria's clenched fist against the floor.

"Stop! You're hurting me!"

Willow pounded again. Gloria's hand opened with a wrench of pain.

The watch rolled from her hand to the floor, lay there on the boards. Gloria sobbed.

Willow stood and brushed herself off. "You were going to put it into my pocket, make out you found it there. You saw Mark come in here with me and you—"

Gloria got up. Holding herself together, sniffling through the tears, she told Mark: "We're through—finished! I never want to see you again as long as—" The flood of tears blurred the rest of Gloria's words as she went out, sobbing.

"That's all right with me," Mark called after her. "I'm a river man. I never wanted that job ashore."

For a moment, they stood there, silent in the cabin. Willow looked up. Mark's eyes found hers. They both tried to speak at once.

"Does—it hurt?" he asked.

Smiling, Willow shook her head. "I had it coming."

Mark grinned. His arms took her and he held her close. His kiss was gentler now, deeper. It said what neither of them needed to say with words.

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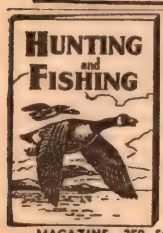

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RANGELAND ROMANCES

(Continued from page 77)

POTATOES will provide a main dish if you prepare them as follows. Take six medium size potatoes. Tunnel a hole lengthwise through the center of each, with an apple corer. Draw a frankfurter through this hole, place in a dripping pan and cover each potato with a thin slice of fat salt pork or bacon. Bake in a hot oven until the potatoes are tender, basting once in awhile with hot water and the drippings in the pan. Better fix plenty of extras; for folks have a way of coming back for these.

POTATO PUFF will dress up your ordinary dinner very nicely. Make plenty of it, in these proportions. Add one cup of milk, two tablespoons of butter or margerine, and two egg yolks that have been very light, to two cups of hot mashed potato. Stir until thoroughly blended then fold in two stiffly beaten egg whites. Pile this mass into a well-greased baking dish and set in a pan of hot water. Bake in a moderate oven for twenty minutes.

SAVORY POTATO CAKES are a delicious companion to roast lamb. For these take two cups of hot mashed potatoes. Add the egg yolk, two tablespoons of butter or other fat, half a teaspoon each of salt and paprika and one tablespoon of chopped mint leaves. Beat an egg white lightly and add two tablespoons of water. Form cakes of the potato mixture, dip into the egg white, then crumbs and fry in deep fat until brown.

SAVORY POTATO STRIPS fit in with any roast meat. Cut raw, pared potatoes into very, very thin strips. Cook in boiling water until tender, but not broken. Best not to let water boil too swiftly. Drain and turn into a warm dish. Chop one small onion and brown in two tablespoons of fat with a teaspoon of mixed herbs. Stir in thoroughly two tablespoons of flour, one cup of milk, salt and pepper to taste. Cook in double boiler for twenty minutes, strain and pour over the cooked potatoes. Or you can sprinkle with grated cheese.

(Continued from page 65)

their stake. And all on account of her. The thought made her pretty sick, but she tried not to get panicky until she decided what to do.

"You mean you're taking Burr's share, too? But you can't do that. That's stealing, Bush."

His grin vanished and his voice turned ugly. "Why can't I? I know a dozen pack trails down this mountain and nobody knows I'm leaving but you, and you're coming with me."

No question in his voice. Penny's fear deepened but with it her resolution to stop Cummings somehow. But there was an insane gleam in his eyes that warned her not to antagonize him too much. He was the dangerous type, she knew. And in a dangerous mood.

"But suppose I don't go?" she asked, carefully. "I never said I would, you know. And I'm not a thief. . . ."

"You'll go," he said, confidently enough to send cold shivers along Penny's spine. "I took this dust for you and you can't go back on me now. Think I'll leave you here to blab to Burr?"

He wouldn't, she knew. Not alive, at least. But the fact of her own danger wasn't Penny's biggest worry. She wanted to save Burr's stake for him. He had worked so hard, through long, cold months, to get it. A daring idea came to her and she acted on it instantly.

FORCING a light note into her voice she told him: "If we're running away, then why don't we be smart, Bush? Nelson will be asking the law to comb Denver for you and they'll be looking for a man with more beard than face. If I shaved you clean I bet nobody would ever know you. Not even Nelson himself."

Running his thick fingers through the matted hair on his face he considered her suggestion. "Maybe they wouldn't," he reflected. "Been years since I saw my own face. Might be a smart idee but I don't know as we got time now. . . ."

"Plenty of time," she cried gayly. "And it has to be now for I've sold my shop to the Cookstons. Get down in that chair, quick,

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Bush, while I get scissors and a razor. It'll just take a jiffy."

But she worked slowly, talking volubly so he wouldn't notice how she was killing time. And all the time she was praying silently, but desperately, that some one would come along. But it was the hours when the miners were working their claims so there were few people about and none of them passed the barber shop. Only too well she knew that no one might appear for hours, when the men left their diggings and came back to the camp.

Even before the gaunt, new face of Cummings had fully emerged from behind the hairy screen Penny was removing the man began to get nervous. "Hurry up, gal. We got to get going."

"All through but your neck," Penny said cheerfully and moved the sharp razor down his throat. When the edge rested squarely across his jugular vein she stopped, boring in just enough to warn him.

"Now move one finger and I'll slit your throat, Cummings. We're not going anywhere with Burr's gold."

His body twitched, his eyes widening in surprised dismay. "You're bluffing," he said, hoarsely. "You wouldn't dare."

"I'd dare anything for Burr," she said, coldly. "Just move your head or hands, Cummings, and you'll find out."

Her eyes held his steadily and her hands were firm and strong on his throat. He knew she wasn't bluffing so he lay rigidly still, sweat beading his forehead, breathing hoarsely. When he moved a hand experimentally Penny pressed down on the razor just enough to prick the skin.

"Lie still," she warned.

A half hour dragged by, each moment eternities long. It was a cat-and-mouse game. Cummings lay rigid but Penny knew he was only waiting for her to tire, or to relax for the fraction of a second her steady pressure on his throat. It was hard not to. Her arm grew cramped and stiff and blood from his throat trickled oozily through her fingers, for each time he tried to move she had to bear down a little more in warning.

Just enough, but not too much. The sight of the blood always made her sick.

But a razor was all the weapon Penny had and she was fighting for Burr Nelson. Doggedly she held her position of advan-

tage, wondering desperately how long she could do it, how long she would have to.

When at last she heard steps outside the door she was suddenly so faint with relief she could barely raise her voice in a call loud enough to be heard. The door slammed and some one came in. She couldn't turn her head but it was Burr's welcome voice that said to her: "Penny, I had to come back. . . . What's going on?"

"She's trying to kill me!" Cummings croaked. "She's crazy as a loon, Burr."

Burr moved Penny gently aside. "Not Penny," he said grimly. "I'm backing her play, whatever it is. Start talking, Bush."

Penny talked, telling Burr the story quickly. Cummings started whining denials but Burr didn't listen.

"She should have slit you open," Burr told his partner harshly. "You had a nerve, thinking she'd go off with the likes of you. Now, we've got a date—outside."

When Burr came back he was disheveled and dirty and blood spotted, but grinning cheerfully. "He's gone," he told her, "but I've got the dust, thanks to you, Penny. Say, that was some close shave you gave him. I think we'll throw away that razor when we're married, darling. You might get mad at me some time."

Penny's legs buckled under her and she might have fallen if Burr's arms hadn't caught and held her up. Burr went on, his face all serious again, his voice gentle:

"Will you marry me, Penny? I came down early to ask you that, to tell you I don't believe any of that talk about you being too free with your kisses. I was just crazy jealous, honey, hearing such stuff about you."

"But—but you're going to marry Bessie," Penny stammered. "She told me so and bought my shop. I—I was going away."

"Not without me," he told her, his arms tightening about her. "And that stuff about me and Bessie's the bunk. She even claims I named my mine for her, but I didn't. It's for my mother. Let's forget about Bessie, Penny."

Once more Penny answered him silently with her lips. And this kiss was like a magic key for it opened the doors of heaven and let a little barber-shop girl walk right in.

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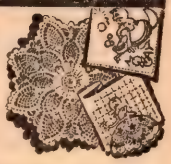

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(Continued from page 35)

Hall ripped off his neckerchief, dipped it into the water. "Hold this to your face."

"But you—" She moved close to him, pressed her cheek against his, so the wet cloth would cover his face, too.

His arms came tight around her. The fire roared above them, billowing its smoke upward.

The black curtain of smoke shut out the moonlight. She trembled, inched nearer to him.

Both his arms held her, held her tight. His firmness, the broad power of his back beneath her gripping fingers, gave her strength.

Minutes, they stood like that, together.

Gradually, the roaring lessened. Hal lifted the neckerchief. Above them, stars shone through the drifting smoke. The moon came clear, full on his face and on hers.

"Theodora. . . ." His mouth came down hard.

The full fury of the fire was in his kiss. There was nothing gentle in it or in the way he held her. It was a consuming white flame.

He moved from her slightly. His breath drew sharp. "Darling. . . . Oh, darling. Theodora."

Not Ted. Not the Brat. *Theodora!*

He helped her up, his arms holding her, boosting her. He climbed up after her. "I've been riding all day," he said. "Ever since I left you, I've been trying to figure it out. Now, I know."

"Then—Melita?"

Hal shook his head. "You saved the cabin because you knew what to do. You know the land. You love the land. That's the kind of a wife a man needs. I was so blind not to see—" His eyes found her and the words stopped. His eyes traced the red glare of the fire upon her.

The wind, quieter now, caught her hair. "It's you I love," she told him softly. "Hal—"

He kissed her and his kiss was softer, gently full with what he wanted it to say to her.

But the way his arms held her, Theodora knew she needed no frip of a Chicago blue gown to make Hal realize she was a woman.

(Continued from page 28)

swung away from the downtown district and sent the horses north.

"Where are we going?" she demanded.

"To the Santa Maria," he said. "We'll stop in Marysville and find someone to marry us."

"Marry us?" She turned sharply to see his face.

"Sure. I bought a ranch about a mile away from your place. It'll need a lot of work but together we can make something pretty good out of it. It'll be easy, now that you know where you belong."

"Stop this carriage!"

"Sure." He pulled in, wrapped the reins around the whip-stock, and opened his arms for her.

"San Francisco—and even the flirtation with Nuncio was just a game—a kind of kid game. You've grown up now and I'll see that you stay grownup."

"But you said that first day—"

"Sure. I wasn't going to let you know that I could never forget you—or that I loved you even before I kissed you."

"You saw me with Nuncio. Now he's a fugitive from the law and—"

"He won't be, for long. Drake's doctor told me, this afternoon, that he's going to get well. That means the whole thing'll be forgotten. I'll find out where Nuncio is and be sure he's all right."

"Still, you said I was—"

Neil bent his head and found her lips. And all of her questions were quickly answered.

THE END

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